

How do Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) view their role in building relationships with parents of learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)?

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of East London for the degree of Professional Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology

Declaration

This work has not previously been accepted for any degree and it is not being simultaneously submitted for any other degree.

This thesis is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of East London for the degree of Professional Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology.

The research is the result of my own work and investigation, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by explicit references in the text and a full reference list is included.

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Abstract

The way parents interact with their children at home has been found to be a key influencing factor related to children's achievement at school (Fan & Chen, 2001, Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). Schools act as an excellent resource to help parents learn how to support their children educationally at home (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006). There are some groups of parents who find accessing the school resource difficult (Harris & Goodall 2007, Sime & Sheridan 2014). It has been outlined that it is the school's responsibility to reach out to vulnerable groups of parents and this includes those parents of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) (Crozier & Davies, 2007; Harris & Goodall, 2007; Harris et al., 2007, Lamb, 2009, SEND CoP, 2015). In school systems, the role of the SENCo is to support children with SEND (SEND CoP, 2015) and a key part of that role is working with parents. There is a lack of research exploring how the SENCo acts as a vital link between the home and school. None have used psychological frameworks to explore this phenomenon. This research aims to explore the experience of SENCos in building relationships with parents.

This study focuses on five primary SENCos and their experiences of building relationships with parents. The research uses a qualitative design to explore SENCo's experiences. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyse SENCo experiences. Two main superordinate themes emerged from the data. SENCos described *Reciprocal understanding* as a key superordinate theme in building relationships with parents. This included the subordinate themes *Subjects and direction of understanding*, and *Underlying elements of understanding*. The other superordinate theme which emerged from the data was *Processes involved in relationships*. This included the subordinate themes *Communication Opportunities* and *Skilled communication using techniques from Solution Orientated Approaches* (SOAs). These themes related to frameworks from social psychology.

The implications for Educational Psychologists and SENCos are discussed in terms of possible training opportunities for SENCos.

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List of Acronyms

BESD **Behavioural Emotional and Social Difficulties**

BPS British Psychological Society

EP Educational Psychologist

IPA Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

NASENCo National Award for Special Educational Needs Coordination

SENCo Special Educational Needs Coordination

SEND Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

SEND CoP Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Code of Practice

SOA Solution Focused Approach

TA Teaching Assistant

TEP Trainee Educational Psychologist

UEL University of East London

1 Introduction

1.1 Overview of chapter

This chapter will outline some of the current legislative context of the SENCo role.

1.2 The socio-political influences of the SENCo-parent relationship

The SENCo-parental relationship is positioned in a socio-political context influenced by government-led national legislation. There is a breadth of legislation which influences aspects of the SENCo role. The SENCo role can be explored in terms of the wider macrosystem. Government legislation influences the SENCo role directly through setting SENCo responsibilities. In addition, legislation influences the SENCo role indirectly by outlining international and national guidelines regarding SEND children and the school organisation.

1.2.1.1 Inclusion (international and national legislation)

Maher (2016) contextualises his research referring to international inclusion legislation. The 1994 Salamanca Statement called for all countries to embed inclusion into their education policies and practices (UNESCO, 1994). Burton & Goodman (2011) highlight how international inclusion legislation has influenced British national policy. They frame their research referring to policy which gives children with Behavioural Emotional and Social Difficulties (BESD) and all SEND children the right to be educated in mainstream settings (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 2001: DfES, 2001, 2004). This legislation has led to more SEND children attending mainstream schools in the UK. Maybe in the past SENCos would have suggested these children attended specialist schools, however the mainstream school age population now includes a wide range of children with different, and sometimes complex, needs. This means that school staff would need to adapt their approaches to the needs of these children. Thus, building relationships with these parents would involve a large amount of negotiation and explanation of adaptations which the school would be making to cater for the needs of these children.

Therefore, policies around inclusion foster a key role for SENCOs in mainstream schools. These policies would appear to have an impact on SENCO-parent relationships.

1.2.1.2 Academies and attainment

Burton & Goodman (2011) discuss how the Academies Act (2010), which allows schools to choose to be autonomous from the Local Authority, can contradict the government inclusion initiative. Academies are given the power to make decisions about admissions policies. They are also rated in terms of children's attainment. This produces an incentive to favour admission to children who are likely to show the greatest attainment, indirectly creating a bias against children with SEND. This incentive therefore contradicts the rights for inclusion for SEND children in mainstream settings. Burton & Goodman (2011) suggest that this socio-political climate emphasises the key role SENCOs and SEND staff play in enabling children with SEND to be included in mainstream schools and to manage the pressure from the government for children to meet attainment standards (Blatchford et al., 2009). SENCOs need to manage the provision for a larger number of children as well as ensure that they show progress. Thus, suggesting an increasingly demanding role for the SENCO. This could potentially put pressure on SENCO-parental relationships in that the SENCO would have competing demands. They on the one hand would want SEND children to be included in the school and on the other hand are under pressure to ensure that children in the school meet attainment standards. SEND children by definition would tend be lower attaining than their peers. These competing demands could put SENCOs in a confusing position as they could make decisions about children depending on which political agenda or legislation they choose to follow.

1.2.1.3 Parental control

Maher (2016) highlights legislation which has promised to devolve power to parents, who have been told they are to gain more ownership over the resources and provision for children with SEND (DfE, 2011, SEND CoP 2015). Legislation has also increased parental choice of provision and given greater control over decisions affecting children with SEND to parents (DfE, 2011, SEND CoP 2015). As well as

this, legislation has endorsed the inclusion of the child's view in decisions which affect them (DfES, 2003). This directly influences the SENCo role. SENCos must adapt their role to meet the standards and expectations of relevant legislation. This includes valuing both the parent's and the child's view to promote better outcomes for SEND children. This has a direct impact on the SENCo-parental relationship, as the SENCo will need to both give their professional opinion as well as evaluate the parent's and child's opinions. This creates a more autonomous role for the families and thus the SENCo has a less authoritative role and this dynamic is likely to impact the SENCo-parent relationship.

1.2.1.4 Multi-agency working

Other legislation which directly shapes the SENCo role includes the requirements to work with multi-agencies. Barnes' (2008) article points to government literature which, in an attempt to defragment services, encourages the health and education services to work jointly (DfES, 2003, 2004, DoH, 2006). This literature suggests that access for parents to a range of fragmented services causes unnecessary stress for families. Professionals are responsible for joining up services and working together to reduce stress for families and to secure better outcomes for SEND children. This legislation requires SENCos to play a key role in organising and working with other professional services. The expectation that the SENCo should support the parent in working with other agencies adds a slightly different dynamic to the relationship. It suggests the SENCo should use their professional expertise in working with other agencies to support parents' interaction with those agencies.

1.2.1.5 Diversity of role

The SENCo role is outlined in the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (DfE/DoH, 2015). However, the document acts as a guideline and uses the term "may" when suggesting many elements of the role. This allows the role to be highly diverse and open to interpretation (Wedell, 2004). Interpretation comes from both individual SENCos (Kearns, 2005) and schools (Blandford 2013). The SENCo role can be different depending on circumstance and is uniquely moulded by each SENCo.

Legislation has given more formal requirements for the role inciting that all new SENCos undertake the National Award for Special Educational Needs Coordination (NASENCo) within four years of their appointment (NCfT & L, 2008). This aims to give SENCos more professional awareness and knowledge in undertaking their role. The award is equivalent to a master's level degree emphasising the knowledge required to fulfil the complex role. Both of these aspects of legislation suggest there is more flexibility within the SENCo role and an expectation for SENCos to find their own way to manage SENCo-parent relationships.

1.2.1.6 Authority

The SENCo has increasing authority within schools to develop SEND provision and allocate resources (Maher, 2016). Recommendations by the House of Commons Educational and Skills Select Committee (2006) state that the SENCo should become a member of the Senior leadership team within a school. This increases their authority within schools and gives them power to make decisions (Pearson, Mitchel & Rapti, 2015, Maher, 2016). However, this has not been made a statutory requirement.

The SEND Code of Practice (DfES, 2001) outlines the managerial role of the SENCo. Pearson, Mitchel & Rapti (2015) suggest that this implies a "lower order leadership" role which entails coordinating, supervising and overseeing other members of staff. This suggests that although the SENCo role has been given more prominence in schools, the amount of power they have within a school to make decisions is dependent on individual schools. Therefore, there are likely to be many individual differences in the way SENCos manage and value parental relationships across schools.

1.2.1.7 Summary of socio-political influences

The socio-political context which surrounds the SENCo is shaped by both international and national government legislation. UNESCO legislation suggests that an increasing number of children with SEND are included in mainstream schools. National legislation compels schools to ensure each child shows attainment progress. This puts conflicting pressures on the SENCo, suggesting that SEND

children should be included within the school but also suggesting that low attainment in the school is not desirable. These mixed motives have the potential to negatively impact SENCo-parent relationships.

Some legislation directly shapes the SENCo role. SENCos are required to work with many other professionals to support the inclusion of SEND children. Legislation has also promised to give more control to parents as well as children. This stresses the need for SENCos to be skilled in supporting parents' work with other professionals and to value parents' and children's views, emphasising the need for these skills within the SENCo-parent relationship.

Legislation encourages schools to have SENCos on the senior leadership team to support them to have authority to promote inclusion for SEND children. However, this is not statutory and guidelines appear to imply that the SENCo role is not given high status amongst senior leadership. SENCos are given guidelines as to how to carry out their role and can adapt their practices depending on each school and their own individual preferences. This implies the SENCo needs to have the skills to make sense of their role and implement it depending on many different requirements. The complexity of the role is substantiated by the requirement to complete the NASENCo. This is a master's level certificate. This suggests that SENCos have autonomy in how they fulfil their role and therefore can have different ways to manage and value their role in relationships with parents.

The SENCo role is directly influenced by a breadth of legislation. Many of the papers describe the legislation but fail to refer to the theoretical foundation which they imply to be of importance. Both government legislation and links between the home and school can be related to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979). In relation to this theory government legislation represents the macrosystemic level. Bronfenbrenner argued that to understand child development it is important to see the child in context. This includes the social-political context of the families and people who surround them.

A wide range of legislation which influences the SENCo parent relationship is highlighted in the research. This suggests that the role is to a large degree shaped

by governmental powers. However, current legislation also allows the SENCo to be autonomous. Thus, although SENCo-parental relationships are embedded within the context of macrosystemic influences they can be shaped in different ways by individuals.

1.3 Chapter summary

This chapter has introduced the current legislative context the SENCo role. The next chapter will look at some of the research around the psychology of relationships and of home school relationships and outline a literature review of the SENCo-parent relationship.

2 Literature Review

This chapter will outline the background research related to the psychology of home-school relationships. This begins with a discussion of the psychology of relationships, then a general overview of the research around home-school relationships. The research related to SEND children, the role of the SENCo and some of the difficulties of home-school relationships is discussed. Next, the theoretical standpoint of this research is stated.

This chapter then explores the current literature in the area of SENCo-parent relationships. This section begins with a description of the literature review process and the journal articles which are included in the literature review. The literature review discusses government legislation related to SENCo-parent relationships. Then some of the factors which are related to the SENCo parent relationship are discussed. This is followed by a discussion of the research which looks at possibilities for the SENCo-parent relationship in the future. The research is critiqued and the literature review is concluded.

2.1 Psychology of relationships

2.1.1 Terms for 'relationships' in home-school relationships literature

The terms, "*consulting with*", "*partnerships*", "*collaboration*", "*relationships*" and "*joint working*" alongside others, are referred to in SEND CoP (2015) to discuss working with parents. This broad range of terms is reflected in the literature regarding home-school relationships. The "*terminological quagmire*" (Lloyd, Stead and Kendrick, 2001, p 3), in itself can act as a barrier in coming to a joint understanding of what working together means. The terms can be understood as situated along a continuum, with "*parental involvement*" and "*participation*", at one end of the continuum, representing the parents and school occupying the same space; at the other end of the continuum, "*collaboration*" and "*partnership*" imply joint interaction with shared decision making, responsibility, mutual trust and respect (Dunst et al., 2000).

These interpretations represent the traditional notion that school staff remain emotionally distant from parents (Hargreaves & Goodson, 1996); however, they ignore the complex emotional, personal and interpersonal interactions that take place between school staff and parents (Lasky, 2000). The term “*relationship*” reflects the interpersonal dynamic perspective of events that take place and the affective personal qualities that occur when actions take place. A relationship between a family and school suggests the supportive interpersonal connection that lays the groundwork for collaborative partnerships to occur (Dinnebeil, Hale & Rule, 1996, 2000).

Healthy relationships between the child’s primary caregivers, the family and the school are an essential prerequisite for the establishment of partnerships. This is especially true if there are challenges for the child (such as those with SEND), when the establishment of positive constructive relationships provide opportunity for dialogue and problem solving. Without systems working together, the opportunity for breaking down barriers and exploring the needs of the child to assist them in meeting their goals can become wasted.

Family-school relationships have been defined as:

“a child centred connection between individuals in the home and school settings who share responsibility for supporting the growth and development of children. Family-school relationships persist and evolve over time” Clarke, Sheridan & Woods (2010, p61).

This definition of relationships emphasises the joint responsibility of parents and schools for children’s development. It also highlights how the relationship can change over time.

2.1.2 Social Exchange Theory of relationships

The literature in education describes an ideal relationship whereby the parent and professionals share equal responsibility, however the meaning of “equality” in relationships is not necessarily simplistic. Social Exchange Theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Homans, 1961) suggests that relationships are motivated by a desire to

maximise individual gain and limit loss. The theory suggests that relationships are based on mutual interdependence. A relationship may be perceived as successful when each member considers the total reward verses the cost is acceptable. Thibaut & Kelley (1959) suggest that rewards and costs can be emotional (individual feelings), social (social appearance and ability to interact in different environments), instrumental (activities or tasks which need to be completed), or opportunistic (things that may occur because of the relationship). Thus, although successful relationships can be perceived as mutually beneficial, those benefits can be complex and are likely to have very different implications for each individual.

2.2 Psychology of home-school relationships

2.2.1 Role of home-school relationships in education

Desforges & Abouchaar (2003) completed a literature review looking for relationships between parental involvement, children's achievement and adjustment to school. They found that children's achievement is positively correlated to parental involvement. The key influencing factor which supported children's achievement was the parental involvement with the child at home. They found that the impact of parental involvement at home was greater for primary aged children and it was fundamental that parents helped their children with "*school relevant skills*" (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003, p35). Furthermore, they found that parental involvement with their child at home was a better predictor of outcomes for children than the quality of the school.

In a meta-analysis of parental involvement and students' academic achievement, Fan & Chen (2001) found that parental aspiration was the strongest indicator within parental involvement that predicted academic achievement, thus, positioning the parent as the key adult in promoting positive outcomes for educating children.

More recently, studies have considered what helps families to be involved with their children in terms of school relevant skills. Epstein & Sheldon (2006) highlight that schools should take responsibility in providing good and clear information for parents about how to support their children educationally. Sime & Sheridan (2014) highlight that not all parents have equal access to this "*cultural capital*" schools can provide

(Sime & Sheridan 2014, p330). They found that parents from disadvantaged families recognised the value of education and they wanted to access schools; however, they were disempowered to do so due to power imbalances and structural inequalities. This reinforces the cycle of disadvantage. Sime & Sheridan (2014) argue that schools need to recognise this and look for ways to break this cycle to reduce the attainment gap. These findings are similar to Harris & Goodall's (2007) who found that many parents see the school as a "*closed system*" in which the school staff have dominance over the child's education (Harris & Goodall 2007). Studies highlight that it is the school that needs to try to know and understand the local community to "*open up*" to those whom it serves, creating a genuine mutual relationship in supporting children's education (Crozier & Davies, 2007; Harris & Goodall, 2007; Harris et al., 2007). These studies put school systems in powerful positions in terms of having the capacity to reduce attainment gaps and encourage social mobility. Supporting parents to be involved with their children at home appears to be a key factor in making this happen; however, schools need to be aware that they can be perceived as a closed system by many families. Schools are well positioned to look for ways to overcome this.

2.2.2 SEND children

In a major review of parental involvement of children with SEND, Lamb (2009) highlighted that although many families experienced positive relationships, there are many families who find that they struggle to build relationships with school professionals. In collecting the voices of the parents, the report found that many parents felt angered that they were not listened to or the needs of their children were not being met. Lamb (2009) emphasised that schools should focus on improving home-school relationships with parents of SEND children. The SEND code of practice (SEND CoP) (2015) stresses that schools should ensure that they involve parents with any decisions that are made regarding their children's support at school. The SEND CoP (2015) outlines processes that encourage schools to communicate with parents, and provides parents with information about options for meeting the needs of their children.

The role of SENCOs is to take responsibility for ensuring that the principals of the SEND CoP (2015) are in place in the setting in which they work (SEND CoP, 2015). The current policy, therefore, puts SENCOs as the driving force behind promoting relationships with parents of children with SEND.

2.2.3 Difficulties in home-school relationships

2.2.3.1 Power and status

Some research has criticised the notion that parents feel they are part of an equal partnership with the professionals involved with their SEND children. O'Connor (2008) explored the views of 20 parents of children with SEND. Her aim was to examine parent's perspectives in relation to their perceived status in the relationship with professionals. In addition, she aimed to explore the factors which challenged the idea that a partnership exists between themselves and the professionals who work with their children. O'Connor (2008) found that parents perceived the relationship to be imbalanced and they felt their views about decisions were less valued than those of the professionals. Parents reported that they did not have the options to make choices about the education of their children, instead choices about their children's education were perceived to be dictated by the schools. O'Connor (2008) suggests that parents lack of knowledge about options for educational provisions and educational approaches limits their ability to hold equal status in their relationships with professionals. She highlights the emotional toll that parents experience in trying to work with professionals and get their voice heard. O'Connor suggests that to create shared values, professionals should focus on the emotive aspects of the parent-professional relationship, which value the human concerns about individual parents. By doing this they can offer personal qualities and genuine support to parents.

This paper reminds us that parent-professional relationships are complex and human emotions are an essential factor in provide meaningful support to parents. To explore this relationship at an individual and meaningful level it is important to focus the exploration between individuals. This paper explores the relationship between a parent and a body of abstract professionals rather than perceiving professionals as individual people and fails to consider the varying roles of different professionals.

This piece of research will focus on the specific relationship between the SENCo and parent in a hope to build an understanding of this unique relationship between these individuals.

2.2.3.2 Blame and guilt

Broomhead (2013) argued that there is a lack of focus on the socio-emotional issues involved in home-school relationships. She explored the issue of blame around parents of children who experience behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD). Broomhead found that parents of children with BESD felt blamed for lack of parental skills and professionals often talked about parents as the cause of children's difficulty with BESD. This created a barrier in how they could work together.

Broomhead highlighted that professionals should move away from a blame culture and begin to establish trust and approachability to support parents to support their children. Thus, suggesting that there is a complex emotional dynamic involving professional's attitudes towards blame and parents sense of guilt which occurs within relationships between professionals and parents. An exploration of this relationship could enable a greater understanding of how professional attitudes influence those relationships.

2.2.4 Summary of psychology of home-school relationships

Supporting parents to be involved with their children's education at home is a major factor that enhances outcomes for children. Schools are well placed to provide the cultural capital parents need to develop their skills in supporting children educationally. It is the schools who need to reach out to parents to ensure that everyone has equal access to resources, and this could play a role on closing the attainment gap. Lamb (2009) found that parents reported relationships between themselves and schools are often fractured.

The SEND CoP emphasis the role of parents in being part of decisions made by the school in relation to their child's education, suggesting a significant shift in the expectation that schools and families work together. SENCos are responsible for implementing the SEND CoP within schools and therefore play a vital role in coordinating the relationship between home and school.

There is evidence that there can be difficulties within home-school relationships and this can be due to an imbalance of power which can be reinforced by the perception that professionals have knowledge about what can support children. In addition, there is a suggestion that parents of children with BESD can become blamed for their child's difficulties and this has an impact on the complex dynamic of the relationship.

2.3 Theoretical standpoint

2.3.1 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

The key theoretical underpinning of the research in school-home relationships is outlined by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979). According to Bronfenbrenner a child's development occurs in the context of multiple interacting systems. An individual child cannot be regarded separately from the social systems that surround them. In order to understand the child, we must understand the four social systems in which that child exists: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem and the interactions between them. (See Appendix 1 Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory.)

The microsystem includes the direct interactions and relationships in which children grow and develop. The key relationship is the parent-child relationship at home, which needs to be warm, responsive and include a secure attachment in order for the child to learn and thrive (Ainsworth, Bell & Stayton, 1972, Raver & Knitzer 2002, Thompson 2002). The next systemic level is the mesosystem. This includes relationships that the child experiences with their teachers and peers. A growing body of literature supports the notion that this relationship also needs to be nurturing for the child to engage with learning (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). These core supportive relationships are influenced by the systems around them.

To support interactions between the child and adults around them, including parents and teachers, it is important that these adults establish relationships between themselves. One of these relationships is that between the school and the family. At their best, they are characterised by constructive dialogue and communication, trust, and shared commitment (Clarke, Sheridan & Woods 2010). The home school

relationship is the key focus for this thesis, with an emphasis of the SENCo-parent relationship.

Interactions need to be fostered by the wider exosystem to be successful. The exosystem is represented by conditions and events in settings in which the child does not directly participate, but affect the micro- and mesosystem. These are influences which impinge upon the micro and mesosystems, such as the parental work environment (Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2008) or the school organisation. The SENCo plays a core role in the school exosystem through their role in managing others and influencing school policies and ethos.

The widest system is the macrosystem. Bronfenbrenner defined the macrosystem as *“consistencies in the form and content of lower order systems...that exist at the level of subculture or the culture as a whole, along with any belief system or ideology underlying such consistencies”* (Bronfenbrenner 1979, p26). All the systems in which the child exists are shaped by the cultural and socio-political environment the child, families, teachers, professionals and other individuals, are embedded within. Examples of this include government legislation or cultural attitudes which affect school curriculum, organisations, practices within schools and policies. These systemic factors directly affect the SENCo and parent role in supporting the child with SEND in the school system.

This thesis has a focus on the SENCo-parent relationship. SENCos play a key part in developing home-school relationships and have an influence over the school at an organisational level. They can play an essential role in supporting teachers and teaching assistants in school to form a positive, nurturing relationship with the child through understanding the needs of the child from the perspective of the parents. In addition, SENCos can support parents to access the cultural capital and resources, and learn about school relevant skills that can help them interact with their children at home and therefore promote positive outcomes.

2.3.2 Joint-systems thinking

Systems thinking (Dowling, 1994) asserts that people operate in systems rather than in isolation. The two most influential systems in a child's life are the school and the

home. If a difficulty arises for a child, it is important to consider that difficulty in context of the social systems around them. SENCos operate within a school organisation; families exist within their own social systems; and both are influenced by the wider societal and political systems. Each system is complex and faces unique challenges. Both systems are constantly interrelating; changes in one system impact the other, and each is constantly adapting. To meaningfully understand problems, joint system approaches look at home and school systems and how they interrelate (Dowling, 1994). This thesis sees the SENCo as playing a crucial role in the joint systems approach. They have good understanding of the school systems and have opportunities to build relationships over time with parents as their child grows through the school.

2.4 Literature review of SENCo-parent relationship

To analyse and critique the research regarding the SENCo role in building relationships with parents a systematic literature review was carried out. This review aimed to explore some of the key themes which have been discussed in the previous literature and enable clarity on what questions may be relevant for further research.

The literature search was limited to the use of one database, EBSCO. This is an online research database that allows access to scholarly journals, articles, books and theses. In October 2015, a total of 11 papers were identified. The search was repeated in August 2016 and an additional paper had been published.

2.4.1 Exclusions and restrictions

The literature review was limited by the search terms used (see appendix 2 for the search terms chosen).

When the 2001 code of practice was published there was a major shift in the perspective of the SENCo role. This included new guidelines for the SENCo which redefined their role particularly in relation to how parents were involved with children with SEND. This became statutory in 2002 and much of the research prior to 2002 has a slightly different emphasis for the role of the SENCo. Therefore, it was decided to restrict the dates from 2002.

The search filtered out those papers which were not peer reviewed as an attempt to restrict the research to those papers which are of a higher quality.

Two papers were excluded from the literature review as they did not refer to the topic of interest. Three papers were excluded as they were magazine articles rather than empirical research papers. Another two more were excluded as they referred to book reviews. A total of five papers were included. See appendix 2 for the details of the exclusions and inclusions in the literature review.

2.4.2 Introduction

This literature review will first explore how each of the research papers position themselves in terms of government legislation. This emphasises that the macrosystem around the SENCo has an influence over the SENCo role. The review will then discuss some of the factors outlined in the research which influence the SENCo-parent relationship including working with others, logistical factors and influences from the school system. Evidence in regards to the attitudes of the individual SENCos are explored. Then important aspects of the role are discussed including trust, community knowledge and approachability. The review then discusses evidence in the literature regarding how SENCos predict their roles may change.

2.4.3 Working with others

Barnes (2008) explored the views of SENCos and parents in regards to working with multi-agencies. She completed semi-structured interviews with 30 SENCos and 9 parents. Barnes found that both SENCos and parents were overwhelmingly in favour of working with multi-agencies. Barnes (2008) advocates the benefits of working in teams rather than alone as essentially it means that “*people are more powerful, more accountable and more able to achieve*” (Barnes, 2008, p 232). It could be argued that this can be applied to SENCos working together with parents. Pirrie et al. (1998) question whether simply putting people from different backgrounds together equates to good collaborative working. There is the possibility that being around others is just as likely to reinforce boundaries between people as it is to lead to

integration. This suggests that there are particular skills or approaches which can support successful relationships between SENCOs and parents.

2.4.4 Logistical factors

Two papers discuss the logistical factors which are involved in forming healthy home-school relationships. Burton & Goodman (2011) interviewed 4 SENCOs and 8 support staff to investigate their viewpoints on their roles, relationships and capacity to support inclusive practice for students with BESD. The emphasis for working with parents in this study mostly referred to support staff including SENCOs rather than SENCOs specifically. Burton & Goodman (2011) found that support staff were more able than teachers to have the time to meet and therefore build relationships with parents due to their flexible timetable. This accessibility had huge implications for their ability to form relationships with parents. The SENCOs ability to be flexible around their role can be shaped by logistical factors within individual schools. For example, having a flexible timetable which can work around the parent's availability is important for being able to have the time to meet with parents. Without being available and having the time to meet parents it would be very difficult for SENCOs to build a meaningful relationship.

The influence of the school on time constraints for SENCOs was specifically discussed by Barnes (2008). In interviews with SENCOs and parents, Barnes (2008) used the term "*logistical barriers*" to describe some of the factors which influenced SENCOs ability to work with others. Barnes considered the following factors to be included under the heading logistical barriers which influenced participants' ability to work with others:

- cultural boundaries
- the limited time SENCOs had to spend in various meetings and difficulty coordinating meetings
- information sharing (including being able to talk openly and concerns about confidentiality)

Some of these clearly relate to logistical factors such as limited time for meetings and difficulty co-ordinating meetings. It could be argued that cultural boundaries and information sharing are less logistical and may be better understood under a heading which includes aspects of trust or approachability. Managing cultural boundaries suggests that SENCoS need skills in forming relationships across cultures. Information sharing suggests that SENCoS need skills to help parents share their stories and to be trusted to keep information confidential.

These studies suggest that logistical factors such as accessibility, time to spend in meetings and coordination of meetings are important factors in managing parental relationships. These papers suggest SENCoS need to have the skills to build relationships across cultural boundaries, with parents who need to feel safe to share their stories and who trust them to keep information confidential. This suggests that there are specific skills the SENCo can learn which are important for the SENCo-parent relationship.

2.4.5 School system influences

Pearson, Mitchel & Rapti (2015) undertook a survey with 227 SENCoS to explore their views on changes of legislation which outlined increased parental choice. They discussed how the SENCoS' role in building relationships with parents was greatly influenced by the school organisation and the schools' attitudes. One key whole school factor was the involvement with projects such as the Attainment for All (AfA) (Department for Children Schools and Families, 2009) initiative. This was a national initiative which looked to raise attainment of SEND children by working with parents. In a review of the impact of AfA, Blandford (2013) found that SENCoS had varying roles within the initiative. Some schools reported the SENCo taking a lead role, whereas others employed different people to take on the role of working with parents. The school positioning of the SENCo, their role, and the schools attitude to working with parents had a huge impact on their ability to build relationships with parents. This emphasises how each school takes on a different approach to managing relationships with parents. SENCo and organisational core values, elements of core values and actions were very much dependent on the system within individual schools. Exploring the lived experiences of SENCoS may shed light

on how some SENCoS interpret and manage these influences. This paper was written to predict how the role may change given the new legislation. As this legislation has been in place for several years, it would be an appropriate time to explore how SENCo-parent relationships are now experienced.

2.4.6 Individual attitudes: working with other professionals

Many of the papers reviewed highlighted how personal qualities and attitudes influenced the relationship between home and school. Barnes (2008) found that SENCoS described personal factors which challenged working with others. These included:

- Individual personalities
- Those who did not like to be “*challenged professionally*”
- Difficulty in using meetings effectively
- Power struggles
- Rivalries (Huxham, 1996, cited Tett 2005)
- “*Professional distancing*” referring to professionals who ignored the feelings of families, lacked empathy and respect (Carpenter, 2000).
- “*Professional imperialism*” when a professional believes that their area of expertise is superior to other beliefs and models of working (Jones, 2000).

This emphasises that there are many negative individual attitudes that can affect how SENCoS approach working with other professionals.

Barnes (2008) suggested that effective teamwork was only possible if team members could collaborate, share knowledge efficiently and give up some of their autonomy for “*the greater good of the whole*”. Barnes (2008) discussed research which suggested shared aims, values and beliefs, and the sharing of common goals from the outset were important factors which could bring professionals together (Atkinson, Wilkin, Stout, Doherty & Kinder, 2001). This suggest that professionals have experiences which are both positive and negative when they work with others. A comparison of the positive and negative experiences of SENCoS will enable identification of factors which aid and which challenge SENCo-parent relationships.

This will give an in-depth understanding of the phenomena, with the hope to secure knowledge of how relationships can be improved.

2.4.7 Individual attitudes: SEND staff working with parents

Burton & Goodman (2015) have looked more specifically at SEND staff and parent relationships. They found that support staff perceived effective communication with parents as an important part of their role. Staff felt that communication skills were an important tool to help parents feel comfortable to discuss their children's needs and progress. Furthermore, they found that SEND staff could form networks and collaborate in developing mutual goals regarding outcomes for students when they spent more time communicating with parents. SEND staff felt that in having more communication with the parents they could have a better understanding of what was happening at home. As well as this, parents could have a better understanding of what was happening at school. This enabled a consistent approach to be developed for the child at home and at school. Communication with parents appears to support understanding of individual children at school enabling staff to adapt their practices to meet the child's individual needs. Thus, highlighting the importance of the home-school relationship and some of the individual personal attitudes and values which are important in building relationships with parents.

Unfortunately, this piece of research grouped together SENCOs, TAs and other staff working with SEND children as SEND support staff and therefore failed to unpick the unique role of attitudes and values of SENCOs.

2.4.8 Individual attitudes: SENCOs working with parents

Maher (2016) specifically reported the views of SENCOs on their work with parents. Maher (2016) interviewed 12 SENCOs to explore the SENCOs' perspectives on what powers and influences the parents had in relation to SEND provision and resources. He found that many SENCOs felt parents could influence decisions made within schools, but that ultimately the final decisions were down to SENCOs. Maher emphasised that the SENCO-parent relationship was vital in ensuring that the parent could be part of major decisions made about children with SEND. Consultations with SENCOs and other professionals were a key element in this relationship. SENCOs

valued these consultations and used them to include parents in decision making. SENCos reported that they valued the process of consulting with parents and actively involving parents in decision making. One SENCo felt that parents knew the child best and could give a lot of information about the children's needs. Another SENCo reported that they sometimes received complaints within the consultation process. This SENCo took on board the complaint and reported that they realised what the school was currently doing was not the best way forward. In listening to the parent's views that SENCo could adapt approaches in the school to meet the child's needs. Maher argues that although legislation suggests that SENCos should work closely with parents, it is their attitude and approaches to parents' views that makes the biggest difference in supporting children's individual needs. Thus, there seems to be evidence that individual attitudes held by SENCos have an impact on parental relationships and therefore provision for children with SEND. A broader exploration of SENCo experiences of relationships with parents would allow us to look at the mechanisms which are important in establishing these relationships.

2.4.9 Important aspects of the role: Trust

Rutter (2006) stated that multi-professional support should include "*well trained staff likely to be trusted and respected by families*" (p140). SENCos reported that the trust from the parents was an important part of their role (Maher, 2016). In Maher's (2016) paper SENCos articulated that sometimes they had to make key decisions without first consulting parents for their views. They felt they were only able to do this if they had the trust from parents. This was earned by communicating effectively, ensuring parents always knew if a decision had been made without them and why they were not able to be involved. SENCos felt that if they had made a decision without the parents, they could earn trust by allowing that decision to be altered when the parent expressed alternative views. SENCos reported that they needed to maintain a trusting relationship so they could continue to make decisions without verification from parents (Maher, 2016). Ensuring a trusting relationship gave SENCos a sense of empowerment and freedom to exercise their professional knowledge, experience and expertise. This indicates that maintaining a trusting relationship is an important role for SENCos. This paper was written focusing on educational provision in schools

and did not unpick what trust really meant for SENCos. It would be interesting to explore SENCos experiences of trust and use the application of psychological theory to make sense of this.

2.4.10 Important aspects of the role: Community knowledge and approachability

Burton & Goodman (2011) reported another aspect important to building relationships. Support staff voiced that communicating with parents was helped by knowing the community. Important aspects of knowing the community were understanding how it worked, and understanding the issues faced within it. These factors facilitated support staff as they could engage parents and discuss issues that were important to parents rather than the school. Being from the community and understanding the lives of parents helped to build the parent relationship. This suggests that building relationships with parents may be supported by having a strong understanding of the local community. This paper was written with a focus on developing educational practice. It would be interesting to explore SENCo parental relationships and factors which are important in these using psychology to explore the meaning of these factors.

The authors also found that being approachable was helpful in ensuring parents felt they were able to talk to SEND staff. Parents reported that they felt intimidated by some members of staff in schools. Burton & Goodman outlined research by Westergard & Galloway (2010) suggesting that parents may feel intimidated by school staff as sometimes they remember their own experience of school which may have been negative. Some parents associated these negative feelings with teachers or head teachers and felt slightly intimidated by those in that role. It is argued that non-teaching staff may be more approachable as they do not fall under those familiar and negatively-perceived roles. Having an understanding of how teaching professionals may appear intimidating to parents could be helpful in removing barriers to building relationships with parents. An understanding of challenges to parental relationships may support SENCos to take steps to overcome these challenges. This paper was not explored using any psychological theory. Using

psychology to explore this phenomenon could add a deeper understanding of how approachability is an important aspect of the SENCo-parent relationship.

2.4.11 Important roles for the SENCo: Working with multi professionals

There is some evidence which shows how SENCos can act as mediators or key workers between parents and other professionals. Barnes (2008) reported that families would prefer an approach whereby they could work with an individual key worker, reporting they would like to form one key relationship rather than relate to many different professionals. Similarly, Pearsons, Mitchel & Rapti (2015) reported that SENCos predicted they would spend more time acting as a mediator for the parents. The mediator role was described as a key person who would support the parent to understand and work with other multi professionals. Pearsons, Mitchel & Rapti (2015) found that SENCos welcomed that role. They felt they were in a key position to support parents to work with other service providers and facilitate parents to be meaningfully involved with decisions. This mediator role appears to fall naturally to the SENCo who is required to coordinate SEND provision and therefore is known and available to all professionals involved with the child and parent. Some evidence suggests that parents would prefer this and SENCos predicted that they will have this role. This evidence was collected in prediction of what the role would look like. It would be interesting to explore if practising SENCos do indeed play the role of a mediator within the SENCo-parent relationship.

2.4.12 Important roles for the SENCo: Advocates

There is some evidence to suggest that SEND support staff assure that parents can express their views amongst professionals within the education system. Mackenzie (2013) used a narrative life history approach to analyse focus groups and interviews with SENCos and teachers of SEND children. SEND support staff reported that the most positive aspect of working with parents was acting as advocates for the parents (Mackenzie, 2013). Staff reported that they felt they took the role of “*fighting*” for the views of parents to be valued. This was often against the local authorities and sometimes within schools. SEND staff felt that the parents responded positively when they took this role. Parents would value the SEND staff work and respect their

professional judgement. This appears to represent a kind of trusting relationship, whereby if the support staff take the side of the parent, then the parent will then show respect to the member of staff and therefore listen to what they say. Appearing to be on the side of the parent could be an important part of building the relationship. Further investigation may allow a broader understanding of the importance of being an advocate for the parents as part of the SENCo role.

2.4.13 Critique

The research suggests an important role for SENCos in building relationships with parents. There appears to be a growing evidence base for the personal attributes and elements of the role which may improve this relationship. However, there are some questions which require clarification due to the conceptual focus in each of the studies.

2.4.13.1 Putting SENCos under an umbrella term for “professionals”

Burton & Goodman (2011) define SENCos and TAs as professionals working with children. Each of these roles has quite different responsibilities with the school; TAs are employed to work directly with children, whereas SENCos have more of a managerial role. The study makes a point of discussing status as a key factor in developing relationships. However, the authors do not discuss how TAs and SENCos have varying status roles within the school. The label of professionals, which included SENCos, is also used in the Barnes (2008) paper. This results in a lack of clarity over the specific role of the SENCo in building relationships with parents.

2.4.13.2 Focus on SENCo relationships with parents

Barnes (2008) looks into the views of professionals and parents with regard to multi-agency working. This study concludes that relationships between all parties involved with SEND children can be improved with effective communication and a relationship which develops a sense of teamwork. The main emphasis of this study is not to explore relationships, but rather is an investigation into how multi-agency working can promote better outcomes for children. Although the study highlights relationships

with parents as a key part of this it fails to unpick the importance of this particular aspect of professionals' role and how it is implemented.

2.4.13.3 Predicted role vs actual role

Pearson, Mitchel & Rapti (2015) explore how SENCos predict their role will change in light of the new legislation (SEND Code of Practice, 2015). This gives voice to the SENCo, highlighting that SENCos feel that managing parental relationships will be a more central part of their role. However, it does not explore specifically what this will look like, or the challenges which they may face. A more in-depth analysis of how the role has evolved can only come from a study which explores the realities of the role and how it is acted out in the present rather than constructs of what the role may look like in the future.

2.4.13.4 Use of psychological lens to explore SENCo-parental relationships

All five papers in this review came from educational journals. These have enabled an understanding of home-school relationships from the perspective of educationalists and have therefore informed educational practise. However, there is a lack of psychology within the research. An exploration of relationships from a psychological view will enable a new perspective on this phenomenon. Including theory and a conceptual framework should give more insight into what psychology is involved in SENCo-parent relationships and the mechanisms which influence the phenomenon.

2.4.14 Conclusion

The SENCo role is deeply embedded in a socio-political context. International and national policies shape the school systems in which SENCos work and directly dictate the role of the SENCo. SENCos' role in working with parents is guided by the government in the SEND code of practice, but there is a huge amount of flexibility in how this is interpreted and put into action. In exploring SENCos' real life experiences a more detailed understanding of the lived experience of the SENCos' role can be established, and this could provide further insight into their relationships with parents'.

Some of the factors which influence the SENCo-parent relationship have been discussed. The research has pointed to logistical factors which challenge relationships. It is argued that some of the logistical factors may be better understood through exploring trust or approachability.

There is evidence that the attitude of the school organisation has an influence on the SENCo role in building relationships with parents. The research shows a variance in attitudes between schools when following a specific programme designed to improve partnerships with parents (AfA). This emphasises how even when following the same programme the SENCo role in forming relationships with parents of children with SEND can vary. This again highlights the complexity and uniqueness of each role, further demonstrating how an exploration of SENCo experiences of building relationships with parents might enhance our understanding of this phenomenon.

The attitude of individuals regarding how they work with others is explored in the research. This is broadly discussed in terms of working with other professionals. Barnes (2008) highlights the negative and positive aspects of individual attitudes that can impact professional relationships. There is some evidence to suggest that SEND staff in general have had positive experiences working with parents. There is also evidence to suggest that SENCos have positive experiences and held positive attitudes towards building relationships with parents. It seems that the experiences of school staff enabled further understanding of how they approach building relationships with parents. However, the role of SENCos specifically has not been explored. Maher (2016) suggests that individual SENCos' attitudes to working with parents influence how children's needs are supported in schools. Further evidence to explore the difficult and positive experiences of SENCos in building relationships may give further insight into how individual attitudes influence building relationships with parents. Viewing these with the application of psychological theory will give insight into an alternative perspective.

There is evidence that specific traits such as trust are important in building relationships with parents. The evidence suggests that community knowledge and approachability are important individual traits for building relationships with parents for SEND staff. These have not yet been explored drawing on psychological theory.

Working with multi-professionals has been highlighted as an important part of the SENCo role. Some SENCos have suggested that parents would find it difficult to form relationships with a wide range of professionals. SENCos predicted that they may take on a role of mediator with changes to the SEND Code of Practice. It will be interesting to see if the changes in the code of practice have resulted in SENCos experiencing a mediator role in building relationships with parents. Some evidence suggests that SEND staff also play the role of the advocator. It may be that this is an important part of the SENCo parental relationship.

Of the research which exists there is a lack of exploration into the specific role of the SENCo or elements of their role in building relationships with parents. The research has generally been restricted to the predicted change in role rather than the actual role. None of the papers reviewed take a psychological viewpoint. In taking a psychological perspective, new insights may be discovered and this is likely to aid our understanding of the phenomenon. The findings from this literature review suggest that the phenomena of SENCo-parent relationships would benefit from further exploration.

2.5 Purpose of research

The purpose of this research is exploratory, in that it aims to gain a better understanding of the experiences of SENCos building relationships with parents. This will be developed from their own perspectives. The research aims to build on previous research which implies that SENCos are a key link between the home and school for SEND families. This research will have a focus on the lived experiences of SENCos and explore what they can tell us about home school relationships. It is hoped that findings will provide an in depth understanding of the SENCo-parent relationship and the factors which are associated with building SENCo-parent relationships.

2.6 Research Questions

1. What are Special Educational Needs Coordinators' (SENCos') experiences of positive relationships with parents of learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)?

2. What are Special Educational Needs Coordinators' (SENCOs') experiences of how relationships with parents of learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) have been challenging?
3. What are Special Educational Needs Coordinators' (SENCOs') experiences of how relationships with parents of learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) have been improved?

2.7 Chapter summary

This chapter has identified the psychology of relationships and discussed the psychology of home-school relationships. There is research that suggests that not all parents have equal access to the school as a resource for learning how to support children educationally, as well as some of the difficulties parents of children with SEND have experienced. This chapter has outlined the role of the SENCo as a key person in forming relationships with parents of children with SEND and some of the difficulties outlined in the research which professional and parents experience in the complex dynamics of the home-school relationship. Some of the psychological frameworks which emphasise that understanding home-school relationships are an important part of understanding children are outlined in this chapter. This chapter has reviewed the literature which is directly relevant to SENCo-parent relationships and has outlined the focus for this research. The next chapter will set out the methodology.

3 Methodology

3.1 Overview of chapter

This chapter outlines the methodology used to gather and analyse the data in this research. The first section is a discussion of the ontological and epistemological position taken by the researcher. Next is a description of the theory behind Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which is the chosen analysis method for this research. The chapter then goes on to outline and justify the design and give details of recruitment of participants. Ethical considerations are then discussed followed by a step by step description of how IPA was completed. Finally, attempts to ensure the quality and validity of the data are described.

3.2 Ontological and epistemological position

When conducting research it is important to state the philosophical lens through which the researcher views the world. To answer questions, such as the research questions in this thesis, we need to think about how that something is represented in reality (the ontology) as this will have an impact on how we seek that knowledge (epistemology) and therefore how we research (methodology) (Willig, 2013).

Ontology- the philosophical worldview one takes or theory of the representation of reality.

Epistemology- how one comes to know about something and how beliefs about knowledge impact on this.

Methodology- how the researcher obtains the desired knowledge and understanding.

There are three main ontological positions in social research: positivism, constructivism and realism. I will consider each in the next section and discuss their appropriateness for this piece of research.

3.2.1 Positivism

The first position to consider is positivism. This view assumes that there is a fixed reality that has direct relationships and causality; if x occurs then y will happen. This implies an epistemology to discover knowable facts, that the researcher can observe these and bring about understanding that is impartial and unbiased (Kirk & Miller, 1986). Epistemologically, the assumption would be that the world is measurable and comparable. The researcher would create a hypothesis and then look for ways to test this based on fact and causal relationships between variables (Furness, 2014). With this assumption of knowledge, the researcher would look for ways to measure aspects of the SENCo-parent relationship and relate these to outcomes using quantitative methods. This piece of research focuses on the experiences of individuals rather than attempting to quantify and compare relationships; therefore, this position is not suitable for this research.

3.2.2 Constructivism

Another position that can be considered is constructivism. This argues that reality is dependent on an individual's perspective and is constructed in social situations through language. This reality is not fixed, and it fluctuates as humans communicate in various chronological, geographical, social, cultural and political contexts (Burr, 2003). Thus, a constructivist epistemology would lead to research exploring the multiple socially constructed perspectives of reality, including that of the researcher (Robson, 2011). Taking a social constructivist position would aim to show how individuals provide a way of constructing reality (Willig, 2013). This research is essentially an exploration of SENCo experiences; through the process of exploring relationships it is likely that SENCos will begin to construct an idea about what those relationships are. In addition, relationships themselves are constructed through social interactions. They can be represented by those people within the relationships in different ways and are subjective. As such, they do not have a true definition; therefore, the ontological position of constructivism can be applied to this piece of research.

3.2.3 Realism

Realism is a philosophical position that argues that there is a reality which exists despite our subjective experience or awareness of it (Robson, 2002). In taking a realist perspective of knowledge, we assume that knowledge is a “*social and historical product that can be specific to a particular time, culture or situation*” (Robson, 2002). A realist world view argues that it is important to look at the how-and-why of an event (or the mechanisms) rather than looking at the inputs and outcomes (Robson, 2011). Robson (2011) argues that the realist view will also consider the context of those mechanisms. Thus, with a realist ontological view, reality is knowable, but the interest is to focus on the details of mechanisms in place when trying to understand real-world phenomena. Rescher (2000) argues that the language people choose to describe events represents an internal knowledge or understanding. This can be explored to gain an understanding of the reality for that individual (Rescher, 2000). This research aims to explore the experiences of SENCos through the language they choose to express those experiences. The experiences discussed will be specific to those individuals. The interpretation of those experiences and the language they choose to describe them will be specific to the interview context. Therefore, there is not a claim to explore a knowable truth in this thesis.

3.3 IPA (Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis)

The IPA approach to data analysis can be used when exploring people’s individual experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). This approach can be followed to interpret and analyse what people say about what has happened to them. This research seeks to understand participants’ experiences of building relationships with parents; therefore, an IPA approach is appropriate.

Smith et al. (2009) suggest that, as IPA has a broadly ‘realist’ ontology, it can provide a meaningful analysis of psychosocial issues, in this case the experience of SENCos in building relationships with parents.

IPA has been developed by concepts from three areas of philosophy: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography. Each of these is discussed individually in this section.

3.3.1 Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach to studying experience. It is built on the work of Husserl (1927) who established that perception and experience are important parts of understanding the world. Other philosophers, Heidegger (1962/1927), Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Sartre (1956/1943), built on Husserl's work in recognising that people's perceptions and experiences are embedded and immersed in a world influenced by "*objects, relationships, language, culture, projects and concerns*" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 21). They steer the idea of phenomenology from describing individual experiences in isolation to looking at phenomena as individual experiences that are part of an interaction with the environment that surrounds us, therefore as a dynamic process.

IPA as an approach focuses on the personal experiences and viewpoints of individuals. The researcher analyses the meaning people give to their experiences. This thesis refers to the experiences of SENCOs in building relationships with parents. It aims to explore and capture the how SENCOs make sense of building relationships with parents.

3.3.2 Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation. The understanding of interpretation was developed by those interpreting biblical texts (Smith et al., 2009). Schleiermacher (1998) considered the perception of the writer as trying to convey a specific meaning in their particular choice of language. This represents the personal meaning for that writer, which is influenced by the writer's context in a particular time and place. In order to understand the text, we must attempt to understand both the personal meaning conveyed by the author, as well as the context in which it was written (Smith et al., 2009). Gadamer (1990/1960) also considered the interpretation of the reader, who attempts to make sense of the text in the context of their own world view. Hermeneutics argues that to develop understanding we must make sense of

the context of both the person expressing themselves and the person who is listening; these both interact to develop a meaning.

IPA makes considerations for the interpretation of the data. It assumes that the participant is interpreting the experiences that happened and also that the researcher is making an interpretation of the data they have collected. This is known as the double hermeneutic (Smith et al., 2009). This double hermeneutic interpretation forms an important part of the analysis process. Through the IPA process, this research will consider both the meaning of experiences for the SENCos and take into consideration the meaning of this for the researcher.

3.3.3 Idiography

Idiography has influenced IPA as it values the individual case. It argues for research to have a focus on the analysis of the detail, and how phenomena can be understood from an individual's perspective in context. Idiography takes a certain perspective on how to establish generalisations (Harre, 1979). The nomothetic approach to enquiry collects a broad range of data from individuals, then looks at the average measurements and applies that to individuals. In contrast to the nomothetic approach, idiography analyses the individual at depth and then looks at how that depth of knowledge can be applied to other individuals.

In taking a nomothetic approach, data from a huge range of people is taken in an attempt to create an 'average person'. In doing this, the resultant data becomes a fictional individual. We focus on data that represents someone who does not actually exist, therefore losing the essence of what makes an individual (Lamiell, 1987, Datan, Rodeheaver & Hughes, 1987).

Warnock (1987) argues that by studying in detail how we and other people deal with a particular situation, we can find out about shared experiences. These interpretations of shared experiences can help us understand how others in general experience the world.

IPA uses detailed analysis to understand the complex processes of human psychology. The data from each case is examined and then compared and contrasted to a small amount of other cases. This enables fine-grained accounts of

individual cases and a reflection on shared experiences. In connecting the details of experiences to previous psychological research, new insights can be formed.

This research will take an ideographic perspective, and focus on the individual experiences for a few SENCoS in great detail. This evidence can be used to explore the mechanisms of the SENCo-parent relationships and what the meaning of these are from the perspective of the SENCo.

3.3.4 Summary of IPA

The method of IPA puts a huge value on experiences for both the participant and for the researcher (as discussed below). IPA has a focus on phenomenology: experiences and how individuals make sense of these. The method makes it clear that these experiences are an interpretation through several levels (hermeneutics). Initially the experience is interpreted through the eyes of the person experiencing them (SENCo). Interpretation also happens as the researcher listens to the interviewee and in deeper analysis of the interviews through the double hermeneutic process. The researcher enters the hermeneutic cycle, whereby the researcher makes interpretations based on individual details, and on the larger picture of the entire interview, and later all of the interview transcripts. Idiography is an important aspect of IPA as the process aims to value the details of individual cases rather than attempting to make sense of many cases.

This approach to research is suitable to this thesis as it focused on understanding the experiences of SENCoS in building relationships with parents. IPA positions the SENCo-parent relationship as a phenomenon. This research aims to explore this phenomena through the perspective of the SENCo. A focus on a few individual cases will enable an in-depth understanding of the SENCo-parent relationship.

3.3.5 My position as a researcher

The researcher attempts to be understand the phenomenon through the eyes of the participant, but they are also attempting to do this through a new perspective and their own interpretation (Smith et al., 2009). In IPA analysis, the researcher follows the steps outlined in section 3.7.5. As the steps move on, the researcher's own interpretations became gradually more entwined in the data from the interview, and

the participants interpretations. These steps included returning to the text so that the researcher's interpretation remains fixed to the data from the interview.

3.4 Design

This research will use a qualitative design method, which applies an in-depth analysis of individual cases. By asking SENCos to reflect on their experiences of building relationships with parents, this research aims to gain an understanding of what SENCo-parent relationships mean to those who experience them, and what are the mechanisms involved in those relationships. A qualitative approach will allow a deeper understanding of individual experience than could be obtained from a quantitative method (Silverman, 2005). Qualitative research often takes an inductive approach whereby the emphasis is to generate theory from data. This contrasts to a quantitative approach, which aims to explore to what extent theory can explain data. A qualitative approach allows for a non-structured methodology, which can be flexible to real life events. This can be applied to the exploratory style of this thesis, which will aim to generate rather than test theory (Bryman, 2004).

3.5 Participants

3.5.1 Sampling

This thesis used a non-probability purposive sample, whereby participants were chosen who fitted the criteria for the research question. All the participants needed to be SENCos who worked in a mainstream primary school. It was important that the participants fitted these criteria so that they had experiences of building relationships with parents in the role of a SENCo. It was decided to maintain a focus in mainstream primary schools to recruit a homogenous group. This group was chosen as the demands of the role are likely to change in a:

- specialist school wherein the SENCo often takes the role of the headteacher
- secondary school where it is likely the relationship with the parent is varied, as parents become less involved with the school as the children become more independent e.g. walking to and from school, taking responsibility for homework and learning etc.

The primary concern for IPA is a detailed analysis of individual experiences. As such, a small sample size is required to explore in depth the complex nature of these experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. (2009) suggest a sample size of between three and six participants. This sample size should provide sufficient data so that meaningful points can be extracted from the transcripts, but not too much data so that the researcher is unable to explore each individual case in depth. In this thesis five SENCos were interviewed.

3.5.2 Recruitment

Participants were recruited through gatekeepers who were Educational Psychologists (EP). Working in the borough in which the researcher also works. The EPs asked SENCos who they worked with if they were interested in taking part in the research. Those SENCos were asked to contact the researcher via email if they were interested. All of those who expressed interest in taking part were sent an information sheet and consent form via email (see appendix 3 and 4). Once informed consent had been gained, times and dates were arranged to conduct the interviews.

3.6 Ethical considerations

Informed consent was gained from all the participants. Each was sent an information sheet and consent form (see appendix 3 and 4). This included information about withdrawal from the study- participants were reminded they could withdraw from the study at the beginning of each interview- alongside information about keeping the data anonymised. The participants were informed that interviews would be digitally recorded and the transcripts would be anonymised.

It was decided that those SENCos with whom the researcher already had a working relationship with would not be invited to take part. This was to avoid any complications with relationships already established between the researcher and the parents discussed or the SENCo. Had the researcher known the parents or SENCos, any information already known may have impacted on the analysis of the data.

For this research, ethical approval was given by the University of East London (UEL) (see appendix 5). This process was informed by guidelines issued by the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2009) and by the UEL code of practice (UEL, 2010).

3.7 Research technique

3.7.1 Interviews

It was decided to use individual interviews to gain rich information about the SENCo experiences. This is a method recommended by Smith et al. (2009). Individual interviews allow for participants to explain detailed stories, thoughts and feelings. They also allow the space for participants to “*think, speak and be heard*” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 57).

A semi-structured interview schedule was constructed to give guidance during the interview towards answering the research question. There are several advantages of using a semi-structured interview rather than a non-structured or structured interview. The semi-structure was chosen over the non-structured interview as this gave the researcher the opportunity to plan open questions. The semi-structured style allowed the interview researcher to adapt questioning and prompts in accordance to engagement with the participant, therefore creating rich data (Smith et al. 2009). See appendix 6 for the semi-structured interview schedule.

3.7.2 Interview process

During the development of the interview schedule, questions were peer-reviewed by an Academic Tutor and by a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP) from UEL. This helped to verify clarity of the questioning, relevance to the research questions, and allowed preparation for interviewing techniques. The schedule was designed using guidance from Smith et al. (2009). This included details regarding planning the wording for open questions, ideas for prompting participants, valuing rapport building, as well as giving the participants a clear introduction as to the purpose and expectations of the interview.

Written, informed consent was gained before each interview. This included revisiting the information sheet so that the researcher could ensure each SENCo had read the

information. Each interview lasted from 40-60 minutes. All the interviews were digitally audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

3.7.3 Data collection

Five participants agreed to take part in the research. The data was collected over a four week period during term time. Each interview was arranged via email and took place in the school in which each SENCo was working. The interviews took place in a small room within each school. It was asked for the rooms to be private, quiet, and comfortable so that the interviewees could talk freely and without disturbance.

3.7.4 Data Analysis

IPA was used as a tool to analyse the data. This method allows detailed analysis of the lived experiences of participants and includes explicit interpretation of the data by the researcher. This gives the freedom for participants to be experts in their own experiences and for the researcher to play a dynamic and active role in interpreting the data (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

The process of IPA is idiographic and during the initial stages value is given to the individuals' experiences. In the later stages commonalities are looked for between each of the participants' interview transcripts (Smith et al., 2009). In the detailed examination of each account, followed by the examination of similarities and differences between each interview, it is believed that patterns of shared experiences will emerge (Smith et al., 2009).

3.7.4.1 Bracketing

During the process of data analysis, the researcher attempts to "bracket" their preconceptions and judgements about what the interviewee has said (Spinelli, 2005). This is to attempt to remain focused on the interviewees interpretation of events. The process of focusing on the data from the interviews is supported by following the steps of IPA analysis outlined below. Bracketing is also supported by using a reflexive diary, so that any thoughts about the interviewer's interpretation can be noted and returned to after the data analysis has been completed.

3.7.5 IPA Analysis

Step 1

All the audio files were transcribed verbatim by the researcher.

Step 2

The first transcript was carefully read, then re-read, and initial notes were taken. The focus was on the meaning the participant was conveying in small segments of the transcript, and thinking about these in comparison the whole interview, forming part of the hermeneutic cycle. In forming the initial exploration, the transcript was read and re-read with a focus on the following during each cycle:

- **Descriptive comments** (normal text): these are comments related to descriptions of events.
- **Linguistic comments** (italics): these are comments regarding the way language was used with ideas about what meaning the participant was trying to make, considering the words they choose and the way words were said.
- **Conceptual comments** (underlined): these are more interpretive comments about what meaning it is believed the participant is trying to convey, moving more towards the meaning across the interview rather than focusing on individual instances.

The stage of initial note-taking and building up of comments is shown in the extract below (Table 1) in the initial notes column.

Table 1: Extract of IPA analysis

Transcript	Initial notes	Emergent themes
I think they have this preconceived notion because their child they are the person that is always been spoken to at the end of the day. Your child did this by the teacher, they've done this they've done that and then all of a sudden I	Non-judgmental <u>Feeling sorry for the parents?</u> Negative conversations with parents- reporting what the child is struggling with.	Non-judgemental Understanding parents' world

<p>come along and I'm trying to work with the child and help the child in school, but then they are meeting someone who is slightly senior and I think they feel a bit (pause) not threatened, but (pause) I don't know what the word is, there is a guard that goes up because they feel like you are judging. Am I a good parent? Are you judging what I do at home? And then you have situations with parents who go, they were not like this at home. And then it's really having to work with them to help them understand then if he is not having issues at home then tell us what you are doing so that we can do the same in school. But then we try those things and they don't necessarily work. It's about getting the parents to understand that this is a completely different environment, that they are one maybe two at home but they are one child in the class full of 30.</p>	<p>Parent's perception of senior staff. <u>Fear of authority. Being told what to do by someone else.</u></p> <p>Concept of a good parent- SENCo thinks parent might be thinking that they are not a good parent. <u>Difficult to choose word guard-judging-threat does she feel like parents are hard to get to- are they defensive?</u></p> <p><u>Core value –good parenting.</u></p> <p>Knowing the child at school- can be different from home. <u>Which is the 'real' child? Sharing knowledge of what works.</u></p> <p>Explaining school environments</p> <p>Things that don't work.</p>	<p>Understanding parents' world</p> <p>Non-judgemental</p> <p>Parents open up to SENCo</p> <p>Understanding parents' world</p>
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Step 3

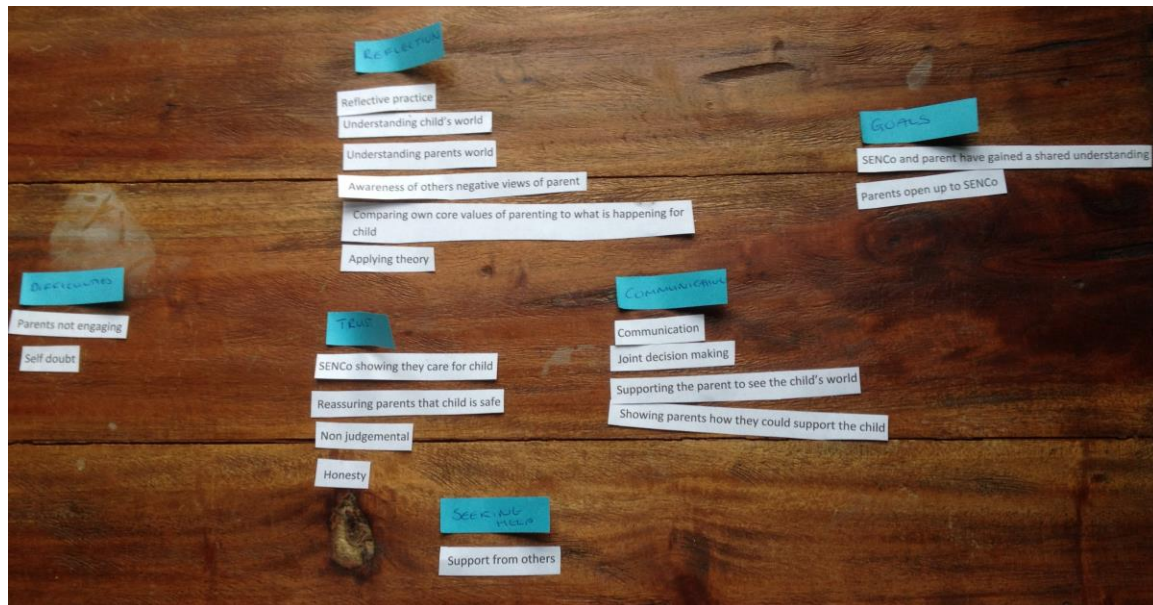
In the next stage the emergent themes were drawn by rereading the notes and referring back to the original text. The themes were expressed as short phrases that captured the original meanings and the researcher's interpretations. See Table 1 (above) for an example of the development of emergent themes.

Step 4

In the next stage, connections between the emergent themes were developed. The emergent themes were collected and copied and pasted onto a Word document.

These were then cut out and reorganised spatially. Through the processes of abstraction, polarisation, subsumption, contextualisation, numeration and function (as described in Smith et al., 2009) superordinate themes were collated. See photo 1 below for an example of the spatial organisation of superordinate themes for one interview. The superordinate themes for the other interviews can be found in appendix 7.

Photo 1: Superordinate themes for interview 5



Step 5

Steps 2-4 were repeated for each interview. Between each case, analysis/ideas from the previous interviews were bracketed to stick to the ideographical approach of IPA.

Step 6

The final stage of the analysis was to look for patterns across the cases. For each interview the superordinate themes were placed in a table alongside key quotations from the text. Tables of superordinate themes for each interview were placed alongside each other to be compared. The processes of abstraction, polarisation, subsumption, contextualisation, numeration and function were again utilised with the eventual colour-coding of group superordinate themes (see appendix 8).

The whole process is defined by Smith et al. (2009) as fluid, and the analysis only becomes finalised during the process of writing the final narrative. This can be found in the following chapter.

3.8 Quality and validity

Mertens (2005) developed the following standards for indicating the quality of qualitative data: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. The following section discussed these standards and how the data and analysis process was followed to ensure quality.

3.8.1 Credibility

Lincoln (2009) suggested that quality data, and interpretation of this, should include a deep and close involvement of the researcher in the community of which the participant is part. This piece of research was completed within the area in which the researcher worked. As such, the researcher has a knowledge of the local community at a mesosystemic level. This was particularly helpful in understanding some of the community issues. The researcher is also familiar with the SENCo role and has experience of working with both SENCos and parents together over a period of time. This was particularly helpful in understanding the meaning of terms used, which referred to local provision, local/national acronyms, and training that some of the SENCos had been on, provide by the local borough.

As stated previously, none of the SENCos were those whom the researcher had had a previous professional relationship. This helped to remain idiographic in the analysis and interpretation. As there was no additional information about the children, families and professionals, the researcher was able to focus on the SENCos' interpretation, which was expressed during each interview.

Mertens (2015) states that any analysis claims should be supported by sufficient data. As well as this, the process of analysis and interpretation should be made explicit so that claims can be traced clearly. In the previous section, the process of analysis is explicitly outlined step by step. The raw data, including the steps of analysis for each interview, are included in the appendices (appendices 6-7). Direct quotes from the interview transcripts are included in the data analysis narrative so

that claims can be evidenced directly back to the raw data. This should make it clear to the reader how the themes have emerged through interpretation of the data.

3.8.2 Transferability

Rather than assuming generalisability, Smith et al. (2009) argue that qualitative data can have “*theoretical transferability*” (Smith et al., 2009 p.51). This means that the reader can make links between the IPA in this piece of research, their own experiences, and the claims in the literature. Smith suggests that providing the raw data, which includes the rich, transparent, and contextualised accounts of the interviews, should allow the reader to make judgements regarding how that IPA can be related to their own thinking and experiences. Being clear about the links of the IPA in this research to the literature enables the reader to make their own assessments of how this could be applied to their own thinking. The raw data is provided and a discussion of the literature is included in this thesis; therefore, the reader can decide if this information effectively applies to their own context.

3.8.3 Dependability

Guba & Lincoln (1989) suggest that dependability is similar to reliability in a positivist ontology. Reliability of the data would mean that the measure was consistent over time. Qualitative research does not expect the data to be reliable, as the data is dependent on the context and the interpretation of the researcher; however, the researcher needs to keep track of how their interpretations have emerged. To track the development of themes in the data, records of each of the stages of analysis are included in the appendices (appendices 6-7). As well as this, the process of analysis is outlined above. This tracking should make it clear to the reader how the themes emerged through the process of IPA.

3.8.4 Confirmability

Guba & Lincoln (1989) identified that confirmability is the ability for the reader to see how the interpretations and analysis link to the data. It is important that the analysis process is clearly set out, and themes in the data can be traced directly back to the original raw data. For this research, a clear and explicit outline of the steps of analysis is given along with examples of the raw data. Throughout the analysis

process the researcher returned to the original transcripts. This is clearly described in the following analysis section. In addition, direct quotes from the raw data are included in the analysis section to create a narrative alongside the interpretations. Yin (2009) suggests that this provides a “*chain of evidence*”.

3.9 Summary of chapter

This chapter has explained the ontological and epistemological position of the research as sitting between critical realism and constructivism. The theoretical backgrounds of this research has been considered in relation to IPA; the chosen analysis for this research. The methodological choices for this research were outlined and justified alongside ethical considerations. Theoretical ideas about data quality categories were then considered. The next chapter will describe the analysis process of the data using IPA.

4 Analysis

4.1 Chapter overview

This chapter outlines the findings generated from the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) of interviews conducted with SENCOs. Initially the overall findings from the IPA are presented. Then the superordinate group themes of *Reciprocal understanding* and *Processes involved in relationships* are outlined. Each of the themes is described and addressed alongside evidence from the interviews.

4.2 Presentation of findings

The group themes are presented using words which represent clusters of meaning for segments of the interview transcripts. The findings are presented at three levels:

- 1) Group superordinate themes: These are overarching themes which encompass the subordinate themes.
- 2) Subordinate themes: These are core principles which underlie the superordinate themes.
- 3) Emergent themes: These show the finer details of each subordinate theme.

Group superordinate theme: Reciprocal Understanding						
Subordinate themes						
Subjects and direction of understanding			Underlying elements of understanding			
Emergent themes						
Parent understanding of the school	School understanding of the parent	Shared understanding of the child	Parent's trust of the school	Empathy towards the parent	Supportive ness towards the parent	Supportive ness of the school

Group superordinate theme: Processes involved in relationships				
Subordinate themes				
Communication opportunities		Skilled communication using techniques from Solution Orientated Approaches (SOAs)		
Emergent themes				
Formal communication opportunities	Informal Communication opportunities	Finding exceptions	Taking small steps forwards in solution finding	Focusing on a positive 1

The findings from the process of IPA are presented in a narrative form and are supported by diagrams which help to show how the themes relate to each other. The narrative is organised by a description of group superordinate theme, followed by descriptions of the subordinate themes. The emergent themes are described and reinforced using transcripts from the interviews. These form the idiographic evidence and ensure that the voice of the interviewees is not lost through the process of interpretation. Thus, the narrative will reflect an interweaving of the researcher's analytic comments and direct quotations from each of the interviews (Smith et al., 2009).

The research questions are not directly referred to in this section and their relationship to the analysis process and findings are discussed in the next chapter.

4.3 Superordinate group themes

Figure 1: Group superordinate themes underpinning SENCo experiences of relationships with parents of children with SEND.

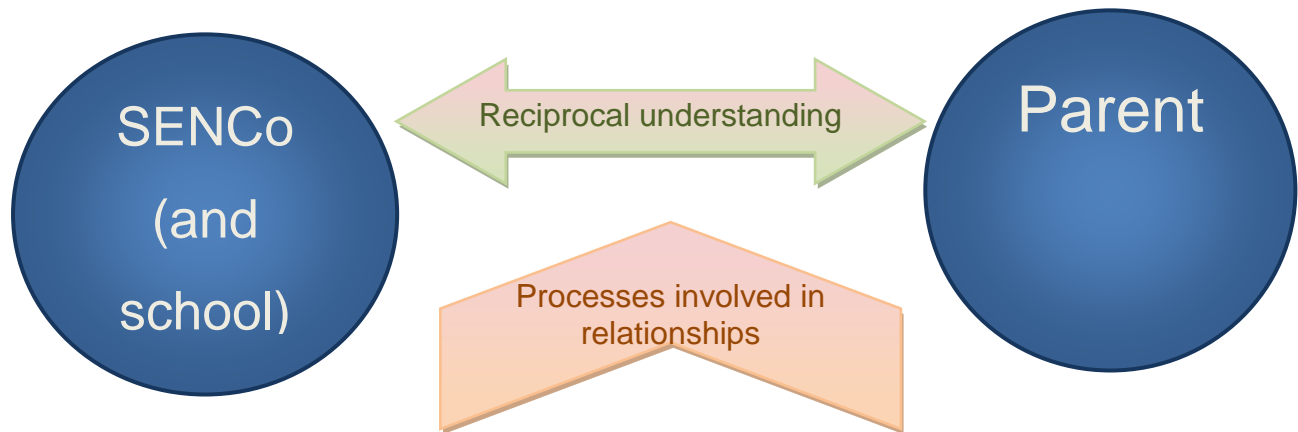


Figure 1 shows the two superordinate themes developed from the IPA of participants interviews. The circle SENCo and school shows the SENCo as an individual, but also as a representative of the school as a whole.

4.3.1 Reciprocal understanding

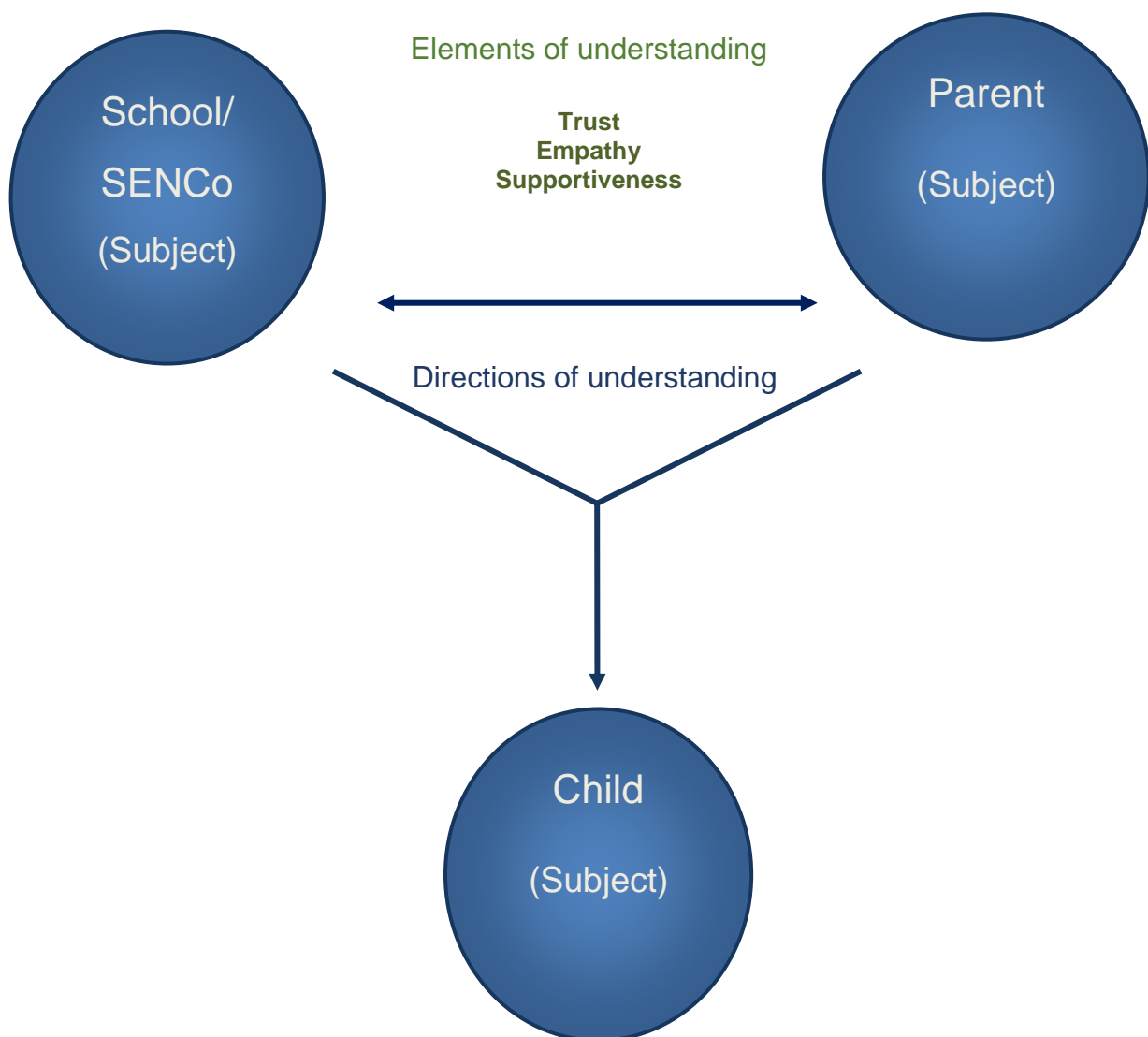
Reciprocal can be defined as “*indicating that action is given and received by each subject*” (Collins online dictionary, 2017). The superordinate theme *Reciprocal understanding* therefore represents the mutual understanding of both the SENCo and the parent. The bi-directional arrows show how the participants described experiences of their own understanding of the parent, and their concepts of how the parents understood themselves and the school.

4.3.2 Processes involved in relationships

The superordinate theme of *Processes involved in relationships* captures the participants’ descriptions of events which helped build understanding. SENCos described many experiences of ways in which they attempted to build relationships. These experiences include communication opportunities and solution finding. These processes were led or supported by the SENCo regarding interactions with the parents. Further descriptions of these are included in the analytic narrative below.

4.4 Group superordinate theme: Reciprocal understanding

Figure 2: Reciprocal understanding



The group superordinate theme of *Reciprocal understanding* can be divided into two main subordinate themes; *Subjects and direction of understanding*, and *Elements of understanding*.

4.4.1 Subordinate theme: Subject and direction of understanding

The subject represents the people who are trying to be understood (parents, school and child) and the direction of understanding represents who is trying to make sense of who.

4.4.1.1 Parent understanding of the school

Each of the SENCOs described how they would explain to parents the support that was happening at school. They seemed to perceive this as a key part of improving relationships. Challenges in the relationship were related to parents lacking an understanding of what was happening in the school. Therefore, it was felt that the parent understanding of the school was an important factor in creating challenges to relationships and in positive relationships. SENCOs often attempted to support parents to make sense of the school to build relationships.

Paula described reflecting on what the parents might be thinking regarding herself and the school. This seemed to be an important step for Paula to move on to thinking about how she can adapt to each parent to help the relationship to work.

“On reflection I don't think it's about them thinking that we are better than them or teachers are better than them. It's just getting on the same wavelength I guess.”

167-169 Paula (Interview 1)

Cherry frequently referred to experiences of explaining to parents what was happening in the school. Cherry felt this was helpful for parents. My interpretation of this was that for Cherry a key part of the relationship was helping parents know what was happening in the classroom. She was attempting to let the parents understand the school in the same way that she understood it.

“Yes because it means that we all have to share that plan, that learning plan with their parents. I want it to be sent home so there is a copy on the fridge”

360-363 Cherry (Interview 2)

Cherry wanted to stop the “shutters from being closed” suggesting she wanted to let parents in to her understanding of what the school is about.

“they actually see the rooms and the work and it's not like kind of closed shutters by the gates. So I think we are quite good at that.”

116-117 Cherry (Interview 2)

Shannon discussed in detail a relationship with a parent which was very challenging at first. She described key moments when she felt the relationship had improved. One of these was when the parent showed she valued what was happening at the school, suggesting that when the parent was understanding and valuing the school practices then the relationship had changed for the better. It appears Shannon was

pleased that the parent had valued the same things that she values herself (education). They had come to a shared understanding.

“So now she is taking stuff from school that he is good at and giving value to it at home as well. It's something that I have never seen before.”

1008-1010 Shannon (Interview 5)

Mike described experiences of when parents realised the school support “*was not as bad as they thought*”. This suggests that in Mike’s perception, the parent had believed the school support was “*bad*”. Mike used video to show what was happening for that child in the school to help the parent develop a more positive opinion about the school. It seemed this process of the parent understanding the school was a key part of helping build that relationship.

“This is who they are playing with and that is really touching for the parents because they feel that reassurance that ah it's not as bad as I thought it might be.”

668-670 Mike (Interview 3)

Mike described another experience when a parent wanted one-to-one support in school. The school did not want to put this support in place. To show the parent that one-to-one support was not appropriate for that child Mike emphasised that the child had made progress. My interpretation of this was that as the parent gained a better understanding of the school support (and saw that it was working) then they had more confidence on the school. Thus, the relationship improved.

“My son or my daughter- they had one-to-one support. Who is supporting them now? Is there one-to-one?” And we would say: “They haven't got a one-to-one.” “What? This is not good enough.” But then when they see the progress when we start to do the reviews and they see the progress.”

635-639 Mike (Interview 3)

SENCOs experienced challenges to relationships when they felt parents did not understand the school. Paula described a disagreement with a parent when the parent felt that the school needed to put more support in place. Paula described that the parent did not understand how much work that would take, considering that there were only a few members of staff. Paula appeared frustrated that the parent did not understand the school.

“So she would then sort of question and check if we were doing everything each day. Are you doing the workstation every day? Are you doing communication table every

day? And I would say: "No we can't do it every day. Because of the number of the children that we've got and the number of staff."

425-429 (Paula) Interview 1

This was a very similar experience to Shannon, who described a parent who did not understand what a child might be like in school when there are lots of other children around.

"It's about getting the parents to understand that this is a completely different environment, that they are one maybe two at home but they are one child in the class full of 30."

46-49 (Shannon) Interview 5

Paula and Shannon seemed to feel like the parents did not understand what a school might be like and this seemed to be challenging for those relationships.

Cherry found it challenging when parents did not understand processes within the school such as what kind of work would be involved in applying for an Education Health Care Plan.

"You know, really some of them just don't understand how it works."

194-195 Cherry (Interview 2)

4.4.1.2 Summary of parent understanding the school

Throughout all the interviews SENCOs described experiences of explaining to parents what the school was like. They described experiences of attempting to improve relationships when parents could understand the school environment and they described experiences of challenges to the relationship when parents were not able to make sense of what the school would be like for their child. This makes it clear that the parent understanding of the school was a large influencing factor in relationships between the SENCO and the parents.

4.4.1.3 SENCO understanding of the parent

Trying to understand the parents' lives was a strong theme in many of the interviews. In particular, SENCOs attempted to make sense of those parents' who had complex lives. This seemed to help SENCOs understand the parents' behaviours and help them to adapt to those parents' needs.

Mike had many experiences of attempting to understand the parents. He described how some parents are “*emotionally needy*”. He talked about how parents’ lives and experiences influence how they interact with people from the school. Making sense of parents’ lives and needs helped him to adapt to their needs. My interpretation was that Mike would be more supportive and more tolerant of difficulties with parents when he could understand their lives. It was maybe easier for him put aside any negative attitudes which the parents may have when he related them to the parent’s previous experiences. In putting aside and understanding the parents attitudes he could then make steps towards adapting and changing the relationship for the better.

“You’ve got your different parents and you’ve got your parents who are sometimes a little bit more emotionally needy. Or seem to come from conflicting background or their own experiences maybe of institutions around conflict and school maybe means certain things for them. Based on their experiences in the past. So it’s just about reading the situation and acting accordingly.”

442-448 Mike (Interview 3)

This was a strong theme in Shannon’s interview. She described experiences of attempting to make sense of a parent who had a complex background. She was surprised about how the parent was behaving towards her son. Shannon recalled the moment when she started to have a deeper understanding of the parent. This helped Shannon to look for ways she could support that parent and this seemed to give her more determination to make changes to their relationship.

“And I kind of...at that point had to take a step back and think what is going through your mind? And I had to kind of look through the dynamic between her, her daughter and her son. And think about what was going on in her own life.”

255-258 Shannon (Interview 5)

This was also apparent for Cherry who consistently described how she could relate to parents’ experiences.

“And they have needs. The parents. They might have had, you know sort of bad experiences or something.”

46-47 Cherry (Interview 2)

Cherry described the parents as having “*needs*”. My interpretation of this is that Cherry has identified that the parent has a need and that Chery could therefore see a way to meet that need. Understanding parents’ complex lives appeared to help

shift SENCo attitudes from seeing a parent as a challenge to beginning to explore the needs of the parent. Once the SENCos realised that the parents' have "*needs*" they seemed to be able to look for ways to meet those needs. This has an impact on the relationship as SENCo begin to see ways they can make a change.

4.4.1.4 Summary of SENCo understanding of the parent

This theme has explored SENCos experiences of trying to understand the parents. In particular, SENCos have described parents who have experienced complex lives. From the experiences that they have described I have developed an interpretation that as SENCos have a greater understanding of parents' lives they appear to be able to identify parents "*needs*". This seems to help them begin to make sense of why there may be a challenge in that relationship. In asking why there is a challenge and identifying parents' needs SENCos appear to be motivated to make a change and develop a more positive relationship. This is explored more in the themes of *Empathy towards the parent, Trust of the school, Supportiveness towards the school and Supportiveness of the parent.*

4.4.1.5 Shared understanding of the child

Sharing an understanding of children was a common theme in those relationships which were working well. Whereas the opposite was true of those relationships which were more challenging. Equally, SENCos experiences of relationships seemed to improve once the parent and SENCo had the same ideas about what a child needs.

"...she also is really realistic about what her expectations are for her child and what her expectations are for us as a school. She is aware that we are a mainstream school and we only have so much that we can offer."

539-542 Paula (Interview 1)

Throughout the interview, Paula was reflective about how a parent viewed their child and how that then influenced the parent's expectations for that child. The expectations that the parent had for the child had an influence over how the parent wanted the school to respond to the child and therefore the relationship between the school and the parents. My interpretation of this was that Paula felt it was important that the parent had a shared view of the child. This way they could agree on what the

expectations were for that child and how the school could support the child. In this interview, agreement in understanding of the child and school seemed to be related to descriptions of relationships which were going well.

Lindsey described a relationship which she felt was very positive and a lot of this was due to herself and the parent having the same view of the child's needs. She described the parent as "*accepting Billy had these difficulties*". I have interpreted this as an agreement with the school about their concept of Billy's difficulties. This shared view helped the school develop ways forward for that child.

"It was easy. I would say it was easy with Billy's parents from the beginning because mum is a very open and she had accepted that Billy had these difficulties."
88-90 Lindsey (Interview 4)

In contrast, Lindsey described experiences of how the relationship was challenging when the parent disagreed with the school's view of their child. This had a detrimental impact on the relationship.

"...and she just felt that the school was wrong. That the school had got her son all wrong."
218-219 Lindsey (Interview 4)

This suggests that having a shared understanding of the child was an important factor in determining whether the parent-school relationship was challenging or positive.

Similarly, Paula described parents who have difficulty in "*accepting their child's additional needs*". This is an acceptance of the SENCo's opinion of the child. Without sharing a view about the child's needs it can be difficult to form positive relationships. Paula describes this as "*where it doesn't work*".

"So I think where it doesn't work. Where parents haven't accepted their child's additional need."
272-273 Paula (Interview 1)

Paula described how the process of coming to a shared understanding with the parent could be frustrating. She talked about how she was "*fighting for the child and the school*" this could be interpreted as her belief that her understanding about the child's needs was not coming across to the parents and how this could be very

difficult and “*frustrating*”. She talked about teaching parents to accept the child’s difficulties. This emphasised that Paula felt she needed to share her understanding with the parents. She described how this shared understanding helped the parent know how to support that child and therefore helped them to make progress.

“But at the same time I have to sort of fight the battle for the child and as a school a way. So I toss and turn between feeling not angry but frustrated would be the absolute key word. Yeah, really frustrated because your hands get so tied with what you can do. What we can offer and also knowing what's out there that would really benefit the child...I don't blame them for feeling like that but it must be so hard to accept, but then I think it is teaching parents that you can accept it but it doesn't mean you're limiting what their child's choices or options are. It just means we know what their needs are and we can see how we can support them to get where we want them to go.”

368-389 Paula (Interview 1)

4.4.1.6 Summary of Shared understanding of the child

The shared understanding of the child seemed to be an important factor in the parent-school relationship. This seemed to form a continuum whereby a lack of shared understanding meant there were challenges in the relationships and a shared understanding was something that helped create a positive relationship. SENCOs felt passionately about sharing their views about the child as mutual understanding was seen as an important part of supporting that child.

4.4.2 Subordinate theme: Elements of understanding

This subordinate theme relates to the elements of reciprocal understanding. SENCOs discussed experiences of building trust between themselves and parents. They talked about experiences of empathising with parents and of feeling that parents could empathise with them. SENCOs also talked about the importance of feeling supported by the parents and helping parents to feel supported by the school.

4.4.2.1 Parents' trust of the school

Gaining trust from the parent appeared to be a key part of the relationship for many of the SENCOs. Experiences mostly related to SENCOs wanting to be trusted by the parent rather than the other way around. Trust appeared to fall into a continuum where lack of trust was related to challenges with relationships, and established trust appeared to be related to positive relationships. Gaining trust was something that

SENCOs were overtly aware they needed to establish in order to work well with parents.

Paula talked about positive experiences of feeling the relationship was going well when the parents trusted her. This was an important part of the parents listening to her views.

“And I think trust is really important so if the parents trust you and trust the school and they take on board what you saying.”

43-44 Paula (Interview 1)

Paula talked about attempting to establish trust between the parents and the school. She talked about trust as an initial first step in sharing her understanding of the child with a parent. Therefore, trust appeared to be an important part of the relationship for Paula.

“And I think the trust has developed between us as a school and her. She's not there yet in terms of coming to terms with her child's needs, but that trust is there so I'm hoping over time over the next couple of years we can really build on the trust.”

321-325 (Paula) Interview 1

When the relationship was challenging for Shannon she questioned if the parent trusted her.

“I wanted to see and to see if I had done something to offend her, that she didn't really trust me or was she thinking I don't want to talk to you.”

363-366 (Shannon) Interview 5

In the quote below, Shannon talked about “soothing and reassuring” an anxious parent who had a child with complex medical needs. She talked about helping the parents know that the child would be “safe”. I have interpreted this as building a degree of trust between the parents and herself. For these parents building trust was an important part of the parents’ understanding of the school. In building trust in the school the parents could be less anxious about their child.

“I had to sort of do a lot of soothing and making them feel reassured and making them feel that you know that the child is in our care and then had to understand that we will do the best that we can to make sure that their child will be safe with us.”

14-18 (Shannon) Interview 5

Cherry talked about parents being able to know that when she said she would do something it would happen. This seemed to be important for her in her relationships with parents. I feel that this is representative of trust and that she feels that the parents should be able to trust her to follow through with the actions she has stated. Cherry felt that she had a good relationship with parents because they could trust her.

"I think it is because they know that I will go and sort it."
831 Cherry (Interview 2)

In the quote below, Cherry talked about the difficulties when someone else says they will do something and then it does not happen. She describes this as a "*hurdle*" suggesting that when someone else does this it creates a difficulty for her and the relationship she has with that parent. This challenges the trusting relationship she has built and she feels she should rebuild the trust.

"And that's one of the biggest kind of hurdles. If you know someone says they're going to get back to you and they tell you that and they don't."
839-841 Cherry (Interview 2)

Cherry talked about apologising. This appeared to be a way to re build trust between the school and the parent.

"We have sorted it. I'm apologising from the school about the letter."
719 Cherry (Interview 2)

4.4.2.2 Summary of parents' trust of the school

Trust was an important element of the SENCo-parent relationship. It was important for the SENCos help the parents see that school as an institution that could be trusted. This helped with communication in that parents would listen more to SENCos who could be trusted and SENCos felt that parents talked to them more if they could be trusted. It was also important in helping parents to feel that their child was safe at school. Elements of building trust for some SENCos seemed to include following through actions and apologising.

4.4.2.3 Empathy towards the parent

Empathy and attempting to see things from alternative perspectives was an experience which most of the SENCos talked about. SENCos discussed challenging

relationships and how seeing things from the parents' perspective can help to understand parents. It seemed important for one SENCo to feel that the parents could see things from their perspective.

Paula explained how she could empathise with a parent in regards to understanding their child and accepting the child had difficulties. This appeared to help her to persevere in making attempts to support that parent to come to a shared understanding of that child.

"And I don't blame them for feeling like that but it must be so hard to accept"
384-385 Paula (Interview 1)

Shannon described how she was attempting to see the situation from the point of view of the parent. She tried to understand that the parent had a difficult time as her husband was in prison and her child was struggling at school. This helped her to look for ways to support that parent, and also appeared to motivate her to keep on trying different ways to look at how she could support her.

"She was just a worried parent and actually it would be and you have to sympathise with her and empathise with that parent and what they are going through because [pause] that is that. That child is their world at the end of the day."
180-184 Shannon (Interview 5)

In the quote below Paula explained that it is important to escape from her "tunnel vision". I have interpreted this as her trying to see things from a new perspective. She describes her "little world" suggesting that others have a completely different worldview and that maybe the situation for others is more complex than it may seem at first. It seems for Paula that taking the time to think through this alternative view from her own perspective is hard work, but important for her ability to understand the bigger picture.

"I think that we can be in our own tunnel vision and little world and we just need to listen...I'm not saying I do all this all the time because otherwise your brain is going to explode."
412-413 Paula (Interview 1)

Cherry felt that it was helpful for relationships if the parents could see things from her perspective. She felt that it was important for the parents to see that she is "human" and that she has her "own problems". Cherry was explaining that it is important for

her that the parents understand her. A deeper interpretation is that she can understand them as she has problems too. She could be expressing that she is a human and she has experienced problems just as the parents experience difficulties.

“But like to know that you are human. I am a human and you know I do have my own problems...And I guess that's kind of empathy isn't it.”

867-878 Cherry (Interview 2)

4.4.2.4 Summary of Empathy towards the parents

Many of the SENCOs discussed how they made attempts to see difficulties from the perspective of the parents. The empathy they felt for the parents' situation appeared to support them to make sense of the parents. In empathising with the parents SENCOs maybe felt more able to look at challenging relationships in a different light. Rather than seeing a challenging relationship they see a parent who is in a difficult situation. This perspective appears to help SENCOs in tackling that challenge with a different approach.

4.4.2.5 Supportiveness of the school

The theme supportiveness refers to SENCOs experiences of parents who are supportive of the school and promoting the school as a supportive setting to the parents. SENCOs had experiences of difficult relationships when the parents were not supportive of the school and positive relationships when parents were supportive of the school. SENCOs talked about how they encouraged the parents to be supportive of the school.

The themes related to supportiveness were bi-directional as the interviews included experiences of how SENCOs tried to be supportive of the parents. Having a positive regard for parents appeared to help SENCOs to feel they could support them. Therefore the themes are seen as two separate themes.

Parents' not being supportive of the SENCO or school was a common theme throughout the interviews and was related to challenges with relationships. Paula experienced a parent who would give one-word responses and agree to what she said. However, she felt that the parent was not going to try to follow through with

what had been discussed. My interpretation of this is that the SENCo felt the parent was unsupportive of the school.

“You get a lot of nodding and “yes” but you can see it's not going to happen.”
504-505 Paula (Interview 1)

Similarly, Shannon described a parent who was “*not engaging*”. She felt that if the parent was not going to be supportive of the school then it would be hard to teach the child. This had a negative impact on the relationship.

“And I was thinking well if she is not engaging how am I going to help him? And how am I going to help her to move him forward”
266-268 Shannon (Interview 5)

Mike described how a parent was not showing up for meetings. It is my interpretation that he thought the parent was not supportive of what the school were trying to do.

“... mum was frequently not showing up for meetings. So we were setting meetings and rearranging meetings and mum wasn't showing up.”
384-386 Mike (Interview 3)

Mike encouraged parents to be supportive of the school. He did this by explaining to the parents what the school was going to do to help their child. The parents seemed more able to agree with the school's ideas when they were explained to them on a one-to-one basis.

“They say: “What is he going to get?” We had all our parents with children with EHCPs up to meet with us and the class teachers so we can say here is what we do.”
624-626 Mike (Interview 3)

Lindsey talked about parents being unsupportive of the school by not turning up to meetings. She seemed pleased that the parent had “*eventually*” become supportive of the school by agreeing to come to the meeting. Lindsey used the word “*agreed*” and this seems to me to be an important part of supportiveness.

“Mum would miss appointments. She would phone and cancel. She wouldn't turn up and then eventually she met with the Educational Psychologist. She agreed.”
200-203 Lindsey (Interview 4)

In addition to unsupportiveness being related to experiences of challenging relationships, SENCos described how some parents were supportive of the school

and this was a key element of positive relationships. The parent had agreed to do as the school suggested.

“And really Billy is a real success story. I really feel it is because of the partnership between school and home. Because mum has supported school.”

69-71 Lindsey (Interview 4)

4.4.2.6 Summary of supportiveness of the school

This theme has illustrated the how supportiveness is an important part of the SENCo-parent relationship. SENCos had difficulty when parents were not supportive of the school and do not agree to complete the suggestions which they have given. SENCos felt that positive relationships were related to parents who were supportive of the school. SENCos looked for ways they could encourage parents to be supportive of the school.

4.4.2.7 Supportiveness of the parent

In contrast to parents being supportive of the school and agreeing to what they want to do, SENCos also talked about how they became supportive of parents. This was different to simply agreeing with parents. There seemed to be an important aspect of being supportive of parents which related to not judging or blaming them. My interpretation of this was that the SENCo did not agree with what the parent was doing, but put that aside so that they could have a positive regard for parents. It was as though without accepting that they did not agree with the parent and putting that to one side they would find it difficult to be supportive of them. Shannon talked about how she did not want to “*judge*” the parent for her child’s difficult behaviour.

“Like I said it's very easy to judge a parent like her especially when you see her child behave the way that he does. I have never really judged her and in a way I have kind of defended her to a lot of people in the school.”

699-702 Shannon (Interview 5)

Shannon later described how she did not want to “*tell the parent off*” suggesting that the parent has done something that she disagrees with. She explains that this would be like “*working against her*” or disagreeing with her. Thus, *working with her* would assume that disagreements are ignored and Shannon could begin to form a supportive relationship.

“And I am not trying to work against her. And I’m not I’m not going to tell her off, and I don’t judge her.”

906-908 Shannon (Interview 5)

In the same way being non-judgemental was also important for Cherry. It was as though she knew that she did not agree with the parenting style of some parents, but that she could put that aside and try to “*help*” or be supportive.

“I’m not judging you, your parenting or whatever. I’m just trying to help.”

164-165 Cherry (Interview 2)

4.4.2.8 Summary of supportiveness towards the parent

SENCoS discussed how they attempted to be supportive of the parents. They tried to hold a positive view about the parents and told them that they would not be “*judgemental*”. This seemed to be a way to communicate that they would put aside their disagreements and continue to be supportive or help the parents.

4.4.3 Summary of group superordinate theme: Reciprocal understanding

Within this group theme are two subordinate themes. These themes help explore what SENCo- parent relationships are. Firstly, the sub-theme *Subject and direction of understanding* shows how SENCo-parent relationships consist of how SENCoS make sense of parents, how SENCoS believe parents make sense of the school and themselves, and in how both the SENCo and parent have a shared understanding of the child. These seem to be the key subjects of understanding in the relationship.

The theme *Reciprocal understanding* is divided into key elements in the subordinate theme: *Elements of understanding*. One of the key elements of *Reciprocal understanding* was building trust, and showing that parents can trust the school. Another key element was being able to empathise with parents who had complex lives. The final key element was supportiveness. This involved being supported by the parents and the school being supportive of the parents.

4.5 Group Superordinate theme: Processes involved in relationships

This theme is referred to as *Processes involved in relationships* because the subordinate themes represent interactions in which SENCos took the lead in improving relationships with parents.

4.5.1 Subordinate theme: Communication opportunities

“To get the best for the child. I think the only way that children will make progress and do well is if there is good communication and a good relationship between home and school.”

411-414 (Lindsey) Interview 4

Highlighting different ways of communicating was a common concern for many of the interviewees. SENCos talked about experiences of how they adapted the way they communicated with parents depending on the parent. They valued formal and informal communication with parents. The distinction between these two types of communication seemed to be formal communication, when meetings had been planned as opposed to informal communication during unplanned interactions. Some argued that informal communication formed a key part of building the relationship and allowed them to approach difficult subjects with the parent. SENCos felt that parents could be open about difficult subjects during informal discussions.

Mike talked about how he switched between formal and informal styles of communication for each of the parents he knew. He said this helped him to build relationships with each individual.

“There are ones that you can be quite formal with. And who prefer that and that puts them more at ease. There are others who say: “I don’t want to be called by my second name. You can call me by my first name.” And those kinds of things. And they are a lot more chatty and they are less formal and that’s the way they want to approach you. And you see the difference. Those who are far more: “let’s get through this in a professional meeting” and others who are a lot more nervous when they come in and you just want to put them at ease.”

434-443 Mike (Interview 3)

4.5.1.1 Formal communication opportunities

Many of the SENCos discussed formal communication opportunities which helped them to form relationship with parents. These involved planned meetings which were set by the school. Parents who attended these were talked about in context of a positive relationship.

"The review meetings. Mum attended all of the review meetings."
75 Lindsey (Interview 4)

Shannon talked about one particular formal meeting in which there was a significant shift in her understanding of a parent.

"We had the child in need meeting with the social worker and the family. And um she came...so the parent came to that meeting and the parent support advisor was there and the social worker was there and the person who is in charge of the um the TAF reviews for the borough was there."
351-355 (Shannon) Interview 5

The meeting was helpful for Shannon as she could see how the parent interacted with other professionals. Shannon realised that the parent acted the same around others as she did with herself and this helped her know a little more about that parent.

"But she was the same [with the other professionals as she was with her] and that kind of, it's really bad to say, but it made me feel. (pause) It's not just you, she is just like that."
366-368 Shannon (Interview 5)

It seemed that this was also a chance for her to hear the parent's story and it was the first time she had realised that the parent had had a complex life. This helped Shannon to emphasise with the parent and motivated her to make steps to support the parent.

"...and maybe she's going through a lot. And when I heard what was going on and the situation my heart just went out to her and I've just thought do you do you have a really crappy life. And I really wanted to do something to. Help her. With her child. In a way I kind of wanted to (pause) do whatever I could to sort of give her strategies and help her son in school."
368-671 Shannon (Interview 5)

Mike used formal meetings to help explain the school approach to teaching children. This helped the parents become more supportive of the school.

“We had all our parents with children with EHCPs up to meet with us and the class teachers so we can say here is what we do.”

624-626 Mike (Interview 3)

Paula discussed how formal meetings were structured in a way that was helpful in building relationships with parents.

“I think it's really...In a way that EHC process helps because it's quite structured in the meeting that you have.”

107-108 Paula (Interview 1)

Paula described how it was important to manage the initial meetings well and how these first impressions can influence the relationship.

“Initial first meetings and meetings make a difference.”

566-567 Paula (Interview 1)

Paula discussed how having some informal communication “*having a chat*” before having formal meetings was key in knowing how to approach a parent. She talked about “*building things up*” and I have interpreted this as using both informal and formal communication as a tool for finding the right moment to share her professional opinion. In this situation, Paula had shared her views about the child before getting an idea about the parents position. She talked about how she has “*learnt from that*”. She has learnt to manage how she shares her view by giving a little bit of information at a time and “*building things up*”, suggesting that communication both formal and informal needs to be skilfully managed to maintain a positive relationship.

“From that one initial mistake that I had made. Rather than having a chat with mum about how she felt with the child about how they thought their child had settled in and building up that relationship. I had straightaway gone in there with a piece of paper saying “I want to get another professional involved.” And I really learnt from that.

That you can't just be just in there with it. You've just got to be a bit slower with building things up and getting where you want to go. It's playing the long game.”

573-581 Paula (Interview 1)

4.5.1.2 Summary of formal communication opportunities

Engaging in formal communication opportunities was an important part of forming positive relationships for many SENCOs. This entailed unplanned and day-to-day interactions. For some they were an important space to be able to hear the parents story and therefore support them to emphasise with those parents. SENCOs used

formal communication opportunities as a tool in being able to build supportive relationships. Formal communication opportunities needed to be structured and well managed in combination with informal communication opportunities so that the SENCo could skilfully communicate their professional ideas and come to a shared understanding of the child.

4.5.1.3 Informal communication opportunities

Regular informal communication was discussed by all the SENCos as an important part of building relationships.

Shannon discussed how she would “*regularly check in*” with the parents to update them with information. My interpretation of this is that the act of being present regularly gave her the opportunity to build trust with the parents. Being there on a regular basis appeared to be an import part of this informal communication.

“So I have to build relationships in that way just regularly checking in with them updating information.”

23-25 Shannon (Interview 5)

Paula discussed how informal communications such as “*daily interactions*” and “*having a chat*” are important for parents to be able to “*relate*” to her. These regular informal communication opportunities were crucial in building up to “*difficult conversations*”. These conversations involved sharing her professional view about a child’s difficulties that some parents found hard to hear. This informal communication was a key part in coming to a shared understanding about children and gradually helping parents see an alternative view.

“I think that relationship is built on daily interactions, if I am completely honest. The more you talk to parents the more they can relate to you. The more that relationship grows. And then...yeah. It's not, I mean, I think it's just like I said it's just being there for them and going out there and just having a chat now and then. And when the difficult conversations, it's not so scary for me and hopefully it's not scary for them because we do know each other a little bit better.”

134-132 Paula (Interview 1)

Shannon purposefully looked for opportunities when she could talk to a parent in a less formal way so that she could discuss with her about strategies which could help her to support her son. These were a key part of helping the parent and needed to

happen just before she met her son. The immediacy offered by informal communication opportunities seemed to be a key part of supporting the parent. It was the immediate suggestion of a new approach to meeting her son that helped the parent know what to do and to give them an opportunity to try something new. This may have been lost in a planned formal meeting.

"I waited around outside the office so I could speak to mum quietly before she went in. And I said maybe when you going to give him a hug and you could hold his hand as you walk out because I think that might mean a lot to him."

490-494 Shannon (Interview 5)

Lindsey talked about being available for parents as being an important part of the relationship. Lindsey said that *"we don't want things to build up"* suggesting that an important part of this type of communication is the immediacy in which SENCOs can react to a parent who is having difficulty.

"And feel free to come in if you've got any worries or concerns you can always talk to us. You know? We don't want it to build up and so she seems a lot happier with that."

472-475 Lindsey (Interview 4)

Cherry said that she would *"rather pick up the phone...than write a letter"*, which suggest the immediacy of an informal style of communication such as a telephone conversation was more appropriate than a more formal and time-consuming method of communication such as writing a letter. Cherry said she *"should make the time"* for parents to *"come and have a word"*. This again suggests that the immediacy of informal communication opportunities is important for building relationships.

"I'd rather pick up the phone and speak to a parent than write a letter. And invite them in. So it's like the door's open if they wanna pop in. Sometimes I even have people knocking on the window else say: can I come and have a word? And I'd say "yeah that's fine." And I think, yeah, you know I should make time."

14-19 Cherry (Interview 2)

Paula felt that informal communication helped parents realise feel that she was the *"same as them"*. My interpretation of this was that informal aspect of *"having a chat"* helped the parents feel unthreatened by someone who may have been perceived as in an authoritative position.

"It's having a chat with them about anything. It's showing them that you're the same as them really I guess."

130-131 Paula (Interview 1)

Mike often referred to an approach which was informal. He described relationships that meant staff could *"relate"* to parents and that they are *"approachable"*. He talked about parents feeling *"welcome"* and *"comfortable"* and he talked about a member of staff who was *"on peoples' level"*. These descriptions can all be linked to a less authoritative approach. Mike feels that this helps parents to give *"disclosures"*. He said that this helps staff to *"access them"* and therefore helps SENCos to build a greater understanding of those parents.

"Most of the teachers here try to make parents feel very welcome and comfortable."

549-550 Mike (Interview 3)

"So you get information. I've got an amazing parent support advisor who's on peoples level. Whatever level they are, she can access them. And so they will open up to her as well."

553-556 Mike (Interview 3)

4.5.1.4 Summary of informal communication opportunities

Informal communication opportunities are a key part of forming a positive relationship with parents. They offer an opportunity for SENCos to have regular contact and build up a shared view of the child and a greater understanding of the parent. Informal communication opportunities offer a chance for SENCos to offer an immediate response to parents and their difficulties. They are also important for the relationship as they offer an opportunity for the SENCos to build a less authoritative relationship which enables parents to share information and this helps SENCos build a better understanding of parents. This informal style of communication appears to form a key part of an emotive and meaningful relationship which helps SENCos to adapt to the parent and child's needs.

4.5.2 Subordinate theme: Skilled communication and using techniques from Solution Focused Approaches (SOAs)

Throughout the interviews there were references to how SENCos used techniques for solution finding which are related to solution orientated approaches. These

appeared to help SENCos move forwards with supporting students and was related to improving relationships with parents.

4.5.2.1 Finding exceptions

Many of the SENCos had experiences when they needed to remind parents about what was going well for the child before thinking about how to resolve an issue. This technique is known as finding exceptions in Solution Orientated Approaches (SOAs) and was first described by Molnar & De Shazer (1987).

Lindsey described experiences of parents saying they were frequently having conversations which were “*very negative*” in regards to their child. Lindsay said that “*you have to put positives and strengths*” into those conversations. This can be related to SOAs and exception finding seems to be a technique which helped Lindsey improve her relationships with parents.

“I know parents have said to me, they feel that when they come it's always very negative. Do you know? If your child has not met expected level for their age or the national expectation. They can't do this. They can't do that. And so it can be quite disheartening, but I think in amongst that you have to put positives and strengths and you know and take it from there.”

401-406 Lindsey (Interview 4)

Using positives was also helpful for Paula. She found that finding exceptions was helpful for her when she was sharing her view with parents. She found that this helped her to approach talking to parents about the things that children find difficult and therefore helped her skilfully manage her relationship with those parents.

“saying the positives about the child but, also saying you know today he's been having a little bit of difficulty coming to ours at group time or using the toilet”

293-294 Paula (Interview 1)

Giving “*positive feedback*” was an important part of communicating with parents for Mike. This helped him discuss any “concerns” with parents. This again seemed to be linked to finding exceptions for those children. This helped Mike to share his views about children, allowing him to talk about their difficulties without challenging the parent’s beliefs about their child.

“Because we have got so much positive feedback to give and if there are any concerns we have got they are usually couched in a positive statement...”
747-749 Mike (Interview 3)

4.5.2.2 Summary of finding exceptions

Finding exceptions was a technique which SENCOs used to skilfully communicate their views about children to parents. It seemed to help them manage the relationship. SENCOs discussed how they would ensure that they talked about positive experiences they had with children to balance the conversations, and enable them to also discuss difficulties children had experienced. This helped them approach conversations which may have been difficult and therefore helped to maintain positive relationships or to improve challenging relationships.

4.5.2.3 Taking small steps forwards in solution finding

A technique from SOAs is using scaling and part of this focuses on looking for small steps to move forwards towards the desired outcome (De Shazer, 1985). This was a skill that was used by Paula to work with a parent when she found it difficult to come to a shared understanding of the child. This relationship was challenging for Paula, but through careful management of the way she communicated small steps forward for that child she was able to maintain a positive relationship.

Paula talked about “*picking her battles*” and taking an initial small step. Once that was in place she could focus on a different problem. Taking one step at a time seemed to help the parent continually move forwards without having to approach all the difficulties at one time. The implication was that managing all the difficulties together would have been overwhelming for this parent.

“And it was about picking your battles initially we just said we want him to be a little bit more settled in nursery. How do you think we could do that? And let’s slightly shorten the time he is with us and let’s work on that. So when mum was in agreement with that we were like we’ve got that in place now, what’s next? So we thought let’s work with mum speech and language.”
285-291 Paula (Interview 1)

Paula discussed this as a skill she used for other parents.

“Sort of picking each individual thing and working with the parent on that.”
599-600 Paula (Interview 1)

4.5.2.4 Summary of Taking small steps forwards in solution finding

Taking small steps forwards in solution finding seemed to be a helpful skill for Paula in communicating with parents about how to support children. The skill appeared to be useful for working with parents with whom she found it difficult to come to a shared understanding about the child. This technique appeared to help Paula make small changes over time. One of the assumptions of SOAs is that small changes are easier to accept than larger changes (Copeland & Geil, 1996, Weakland, Fisch, Watzlawick & Bodin, 1974). This seemed to be the case for some parents and therefore is an important tool in maintaining positive relationships.

4.5.2.5 Focusing on a positive future

One of the key techniques from SOAs is thinking about what the desired future will look like. This is related to what has been termed “*the miracle question*” (De Shazer, 1988; Miller & Berg, 1995) and SOAs which ask the client to focus on what it is they want for the future rather than on the problem (Copeland & Geil, 1996). Some of the SENCos described how they have experiences of using this technique to work with parents.

A focus on a positive future was something Lindsey discussed. She found that this helped parents to see the school as a system that can help the child. This seemed to be related to parents who felt there was a negative perception in their child’s ability to “*achieve*” in an educational setting.

“So we have to put it to them in such a way that you know they can still achieve that there will be things that they can do”

529-530 Lindsey (Interview 4)

Cherry discussed focusing on children having a “*positive outcome*” and a “*bright future*”. This was part of helping a parent to see the school as a setting which is supportive. I felt that this positive and forward-looking approach helped Cherry build relationships with parents who were feeling unsupportive of the school.

“My priority is about making sure that your child is being educated and has a positive outcome. And has a bright future.”

166-167 Cherry (Interview 2)

Cherry discussed how it was unhelpful to focus on problems which had arisen in the past and she stated that *“it’s in the past”* and *“don’t dwell on the past”*. She wanted to move the focus to the present and the future. This helped the parents to focus on changes that they could make and seemed to be a core skill which Cherry used to make improvements to relationships which were challenging.

“And I think the work here is about moving forwards. So you might have a meeting with the parents and they might say the school hasn’t done this, the school hasn’t done that, it’s in the past. And I say: well actually we are here now and let’s move forward. Right let’s make a plan. And to work together so don’t dwell on the past. We have got a lot of parents that sort of cling on to the negative.”

177-183 Cherry (Interview 2)

Mike referred to experiences when he had drawn parents into focusing on a positive future for their child. He expressed that he did not want parents to dwell on problems so that they could spend more time focusing on the solutions. Mike found this useful for maintaining positive relationships.

“We are not doing: oh this is a problem. We are doing here is the issue and here is our solution. How do you feel about that? So because we are looking for the opportunities to move things on parents become very aware of that.”

749-753 Mike (Interview 3)

4.5.2.6 Summary of focusing on a positive future

Many of the SENCOs used the technique in which communication focused on a positive future. This appeared to help SENCOs to support parents come to a positive view of their child as a person who can experience success in education.

Communicating to parents that they could focus on a positive future appeared to help parents view the school as a system which can support their child. They found that focusing on problems was not beneficial. This technique seemed to be a key part of maintaining positive relationships and improving relationships with parents.

4.5.3 Summary of Group Superordinate theme: Processes involved in relationships

SENCOs needed to utilise communication opportunities to build relationships with parents. Formal communication opportunities were used to build relationships. They were an important opportunity for SENCOs to hear the parents’ story and emphasise

with them. They were also an important opportunity for SENCOs to present the school as supportive towards the child and parent. SENCOs needed to skilfully manage formal communication opportunities alongside informal communication opportunities to build an understanding of the parents' views and to promote their own views about the child. Informal communication opportunities seem to provide similar opportunities, and in addition they provide a chance to respond immediately to parents, which could be an important part of building trust. They seem to be important for creating a relationship which is less authoritative.

Within *Communication opportunities* SENCOs appeared to use specific techniques which enable relationships to improve. Many of these could be related to techniques from SOAs. This included finding exceptions, taking steps forwards in solution finding and focusing on a positive future.

4.6 Chapter summary

This chapter presented an analytic narrative detailing the IPA findings. The central findings were outlined within the group superordinate themes which were *Reciprocal understanding* and *Processes involved in relationships*. The next chapter will discuss the findings in relation to the research question and link these to the previous literature and the literature review.

5 Discussion

5.1 Chapter overview

This chapter begins with a brief discussion of the analysis, followed by an overview of the research findings in relation to the research questions. The findings are then discussed and linked to relevant psychological frameworks. The analysis findings are related to the literature review, and these frameworks are used to develop understanding of the literature. The limitations of the research are then discussed, followed by the implications of the research for educational psychology and for further research. Next, some of the reflexive thinking is included before the conclusion.

5.2 Discussion of Analysis

The aim of this research was to explore the lived experiences of SENCo's relationships with parents of children with SEND and to find out what the role of the SENCo was in this relationship building from their perspective. The following research questions were developed to explore the SENCo role further:

RQ1: What are Special Educational Needs Coordinators' (SENCo's) experiences of positive relationships with parents of learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)?

RQ2: What are Special Educational Needs Coordinators' (SENCo's) experiences of how relationships with parents of learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) have been challenging?

RQ3: What are Special Educational Needs Coordinators' (SENCo's) experiences of how relationships with parents of learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) have been improved?

The main points of the analysis are outlined in relation to the research questions. The findings are then discussed in terms of relevant psychological frameworks; these are then addressed in terms of the original literature review.

5.3 Overview of analysis findings and relation to research questions

Below, each of the research questions is referred to. An outline of how each emergent theme relates to that question is described.

5.3.1 RQ1: What are Special Educational Needs Coordinators' (SENCo's) experiences of positive relationships with parents of learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)?

The evidence from this thesis suggests that SENCos had many experiences of positive relationships with parents.

5.3.1.1 Reciprocal understanding; Subjects and direction of understanding; Parents' understanding the school

SENCos described positive experiences in relationships when the parents understood the school. One SENCo had a positive experience of a relationship when a parent showed she valued education and therefore accepted the SENCo view of the value of education.

5.3.1.2 Reciprocal understanding; Subjects and direction of understanding; Shared understanding of the child

SENCos described experiences of positive relationships when they shared an understanding of the child. It appears it was important for the parent to accept the SENCo viewpoint of the child's difficulties.

5.3.1.3 Reciprocal understanding; Elements of understanding; Parents' trust of the school

SENCos had experiences of positive relationships when they felt the parents trusted them and the school. This was helpful for parents to "take on board what you are saying". Thus, accepting the SENCo view was again related to positive experiences.

5.3.1.4 Reciprocal understanding; Elements of understanding; Parents'

Supportiveness of the school

In the transcripts, SENCos described positive experiences of relationships when they felt parents supported the school. This was related to the parents agreeing with the school approach.

5.3.1.5 Processes involved in relationships; Communication opportunities; Formal communication

SENCos described positive experiences of relationships when parents were involved in formal communication processes. This seemed to be related to parents showing that they supported the school.

5.3.2 Summary of: What are Special Educational Needs Coordinators' (SENCos') experiences of positive relationships with parents of learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)?

Experiences of positive relationships were related to when parents agreed with the SENCos' views. This appeared to be true of reciprocal understanding. SENCos had experiences of positive relationships when parents understood the school, and when parents and SENCo had a shared understanding of the child. It was important that parents trusted the school. This seemed to be so that they could listen to the school's point of view and was therefore related to coming to an agreement. Supportiveness was also related to agreement with the SENCo or school, as SENCos experienced positive relationships when parents agreed with the school approach. Positive experiences of relationships were described when parents engaged in formal communication; during this process, both the parents and SENCos agreed about support offered by the school.

5.3.3 RQ2: What are Special Educational Needs Coordinators' (SENCOs') experiences of how relationships with parents of learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) have been challenging?

5.3.3.1 Reciprocal understanding; Subjects and direction of understanding; Parents' understanding of the school

SENCOs experienced challenges to the relationship when they felt the parents did not understand the school. This seemed to be related to parents having expectations of the school which were difficult to meet.

5.3.3.2 Reciprocal understanding; Subjects and direction of understanding; Emergent theme: Shared understanding of the child

SENCOs experienced challenges to the relationship when the parents failed to share their own view of the child. This was related to parents who “felt the school was wrong” and “did not accept the child’s additional needs”. Therefore, there were challenges to the relationships when there was disagreement about what the child needed, and there was an expectation that the child did not need the help that was on offer.

5.3.3.3 Reciprocal understanding; Underlying Elements of understanding; Parents' trust of the school

SENCOs talked about challenges to the relationship when they felt parents did not trust them. One SENCO questioned if the parent trusted her when the relationship was not going well, as the parent would not communicate with her.

5.3.3.4 Reciprocal understanding; Underlying Elements of understanding; Parents' supportiveness of the school

SENCOs experienced challenges to the relationship when they felt parents were not supportive of the school. This was related to parents who did not come to meetings or who did not talk to SENCOs.

5.3.4 Summary of: What are Special Educational Needs Coordinators' (SENCOs') experiences of how relationships with parents of learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) have been challenging?

SENCOs' experiences of relationships that were challenging were strongly related to parents who did not share the view of the school or SENCo. This was related to views regarding the school itself or regarding the needs of the child. SENCOs experienced challenges to relationships when they felt parents did not trust them and when parents were not supportive of the school. These were related to disagreements.

5.3.5 RQ3: What are Special Educational Needs Coordinators' (SENCOs') experiences of how relationships with parents of learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) have been improved?

5.3.5.1 Reciprocal understanding; Subjects and direction of understanding; Parents' understanding of the school

SENCOs talked about how relationships had been improved when parents gained an understanding of the school. SENCOs described how they would explain to parents what was happening in the school to improve relationships.

5.3.5.2 Reciprocal understanding; Subjects and direction of understanding; Emergent theme: School understanding of the parent

SENCOs discussed experiences of improvements to the relationship when they had a better understanding of the parents. This was related to parents who had complex lives. By understanding these parents' complex and difficult lives, SENCOs identified parents' needs and were motivated to make a change to the relationship.

5.3.5.3 Reciprocal understanding; Subjects and direction of understanding; Shared understanding of the child

One SENCo felt that there were improvements to the relationship when they gained a shared understanding of the child. This SENCo talked about teaching the parent to accept the child's difficulties.

5.3.5.4 Reciprocal understanding; Underlying Elements of understanding; Parents' trust of the school

SENCOs experienced that they could improve relationships with parents when they began to develop trust from the parents. SENCOs felt that reassurance, following through actions, and apologising are important parts of building trust.

5.3.5.5 Reciprocal understanding; Underlying Elements of understanding; Empathy towards the parent

SENCOs experienced improvements to the relationship when they could empathise with the parents' situations. Having empathy for the parents' situations was related to parents who had complex lives. SENCOs tried to see the situation from their perspective and this helped them to make a change to challenging relationships.

5.3.5.6 Reciprocal understanding; Underlying Elements of understanding; Parents' supportiveness of the school and school's supportiveness of the parents

In the interviews, SENCOs experienced improvements in relationships when they could show that the school could be supportive. This was through a process of explaining the school approach. SENCOs felt that being non-judgemental of parents helped them to be supportive toward parents. This helped them put aside their disagreements and look for ways to improve relationships.

5.3.5.7 Processes involved in relationships; Communication opportunities; Formal communication opportunities

SENCOs experienced improvements in relationships when they used formal communication opportunities. This was a good space for SENCOs to hear the parents' story and empathise with them. They used the space to build supportiveness. Formal communication needed to be well managed alongside informal communication opportunities.

5.3.5.8 Processes involved in relationships; Communication opportunities; informal communication opportunities

SENCOs experienced improvements in the relationship when they utilised informal communication opportunities. Informal communication opportunities were important

communication points to build a picture of the parents and communicate the SENCos' own view. They enabled immediate responses to parents' difficulties. Informal communication opportunities also allowed SENCos to be less authoritative, which helped parents' share their views.

5.3.5.9 Processes involved in relationships; Communication opportunities; Using skilled communication from techniques from SOAs; Finding exceptions; taking small steps forwards in solution finding; and focusing on a positive future

SENCos experienced improvements in relationships when they used techniques associated with SOAs. Finding exceptions helped SENCos manage difficult problem-saturated conversations. Taking small steps further helped SENCos encourage parents to agree to changes. Focusing on a positive future helped parents view the school as supportive.

5.3.6 Summary of: What are Special Educational Needs Coordinators' (SENCos') experiences of how relationships with parents of learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) have been improved?

SENCos' experiences of improvements to relationships were related to gaining understanding of the parents, parents gaining an understanding of them, and both gaining a shared view of the child. Improved relationships were related to SENCos building trust with parents, with empathising with parents in changing relationships, with building a supportive construct of the school for parents, and in looking for ways they could be supportive of the parents. These are all associated with the SENCo taking a leading role in looking for ways to build a shared view with the parents. They appeared to do this by guiding parents towards sharing their own professional views.

5.4 Summary of research questions analysis

The research questions have been addressed and directly related to the evidence within the interview analysis. These will now be discussed in terms of relevant psychological frameworks and the literature review.

5.5 How the findings link to psychological frameworks

5.5.1 The ‘what’ and ‘how’ of SENCo relationships with parents

The themes related to *Reciprocal understanding* appeared to be descriptive of positive or challenging relationships. In contrast, the themes related to processes involved in building relationships all emerged from experiences of improving relationships. As the name suggests, themes associated with processes involved in relationships were more process-based than descriptive-based. *Reciprocal understanding* themes appeared to be related to *what* was important in building relationships. In contrast, themes within *Processes involved in relationships* were related to *how* those relationships could be improved. See table 2 below.

Table 2: Subordinate themes organized into ‘what’ and ‘how’.

		Subordinate themes
Reciprocal understanding	What	Subjects and direction of understanding
		Underlying elements of understanding
Processes involved in relationships	How	Communication opportunities
		Skilled communication using techniques from SOAs

5.5.1.1 What are relationships?

SENcos talked about relationships in terms of their understanding of parents, their beliefs about the parents’ understanding of themselves, and a mutual understanding of the child. As discussed in the introduction, Lasky (2000) argued that teacher-parent relationships are entwined in emotional responses. Lasky (2000) suggested healthy teacher-parent relationships should involve emotional understanding, and this requires teachers to develop shared meanings through sustained interactions over time (Vygotsky, 1978; Denzin, 1984). Lasky (2000) highlighted that teachers do not have the opportunity to develop an emotional relationship as their interactions

tend to be sporadic and over a relatively short amount of time. Suggesting that teachers do not have the sustained interactions required for a deeper relationship based on emotional understanding. The evidence in this thesis suggests that primary SENCos appear to develop some meaningful relationships with parents of children with SEND. There is evidence that SENCos attempt to build trust with many of the parents and promote the school as a supportive setting, thus creating relationships that are based on a sense of emotional security. The evidence in this research outlines that for those parents with complex lives, SENCos attempt to show empathy, try to understand their needs, and attempt to ignore their differences (as discussed in section 5.5.3, parents with complex and difficult lives). This implies that SENCos attempt to create an emotional connection to those parents and this appears to be related to those relationships improving. The evidence in this thesis suggests that SENCos do form an emotional relationship with parents of children with SEND, and maybe a deeper emotional understanding is required for those parents who have complex and difficult lives.

Although Lasky (2000) suggests that teachers do not always develop emotional relationships, it may be that SENCos do have this opportunity. It may be that the SENCo role gives them the unique opportunity to develop a meaningful relationship over a longer period. They appear to have the flexibility in their timetable to meet with parents, and are involved with SEND children for the whole time children are in a school. In understanding the emotional component of relationships, there may be opportunities to develop these relationships further. (See section 5.8.1; Emotional components of professional relationships.)

5.5.1.2 How are relationships formed?

The evidence in this thesis suggests that SENCos developed relationships through using communication opportunities with the parents. Both formal and informal communication opportunities were important actions when relationships were formed. Formal communication opportunities appeared to give SENCos a chance to ask questions about the parents' background and explain the approaches the school takes in supporting children. These needed to be used alongside informal communication opportunities. Informal communication opportunities seemed to be

important for seeing parents on a regular basis, being available to respond to parents' immediate concerns and meeting in a less authoritative situation.

The evidence suggests that the way SENCOs communicated and the techniques they used during these communication opportunities were important in building relationships. Using SOAs appeared to help SENCOs communicate effectively.

This suggests that SENCOs need to have systems in place to ensure they can utilise both formal and informal communication opportunities. Using techniques from SOAs appears to be related to good communication and improving relationships with parents.

With a better understanding of what relationships between SENCOs and parents are and how they are formed, it is possible that these can be valued and encouraged in schools.

5.5.2 SENCOs as leaders

When parents agreed with SENCOs, the relationship was viewed as positive; when they disagreed, the relationship was deemed as challenging. SENCOs attempted to improve relationships by sharing their professional knowledge with parents.

Compliance to the SENCO view was a key part of the SENCO-parent relationship. This evidence suggests SENCOs attempt to guide parents into assuming their own professional view about what support will be effective in educating SEND children. Thus, SENCOs attempt to take the role of the leader.

It could be the professional knowledge in regard to educating children with SEND which establishes them in a leading role. Hollander (1985, 1995) suggested that leaders fall into the leadership role based on principles of social exchange theory. Social exchange theory of relationships assumes that both the leader and follower have something to gain from the system of interpersonal relationships. Hollander (1995) argues that the social roles of leader-follower will emerge when the followers have something to gain from the leaders. This could be a financial, emotional, or intellectual reward. In the case of this thesis, the parent becomes the follower as they need to gain knowledge about how their child can have success and make

progress at school. In return, the leader gains a reward from the followers. In the case of SENCoS, their role in schools is to help SEND children to succeed and make progress; therefore, it is in the interest of both the SENCo and the parent to engage in a successful leader-follower relationship, with the leader (SENCo) sharing their professional knowledge about educating children with SEND with the follower (parent).

5.5.2.1 Dynamics between leaders and followers: Why reciprocal understanding aids this relationship

The evidence in this thesis in relation to reciprocal understanding suggests that SENCoS and parents coming to a shared understanding is an important part of building positive relationships. Coming to an agreement was a key factor in positive relationships, and for improving relationships. The idea that relationships are enhanced by agreements fits within psychological frameworks concerning groups in social psychology. Theories regarding social identity and self-categorisation help us to make sense of how groups are formed and how people are motivated to act for the benefit of group values (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1985; and Turner et al., 1987). The ideas from these theories suggest that people's behaviour is led by shared group membership (social identity). Tajfel & Turner (1979) argued that when people develop a social identity, they become motivated to act towards the group values rather than their own individual values. In the case of this thesis, the SENCo attempted to create a group social identity and agreement about shared views and understanding. When this was successful, relationships were positive; when this was not successful, relationships were challenging. To improve relationships, SENCoS looked for ways to come to shared understandings. The social identity of a shared understanding seemed to create a group that was motivated to look for ways to make a change for the child.

Self-categorisation theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1985; and Turner et al., 1987) suggests that an individual will form a social identity when they feel there is a fit between their own values and that of the group. This is when individuals feel that they are more like those within the group than those outside, that there is an agreement. In the case of SENCo-parent relationships, SENCoS seem to be

motivated to develop a group identity, an agreement between them and the parents about how to support the child. Haslam (2001) suggests that social identity explains phenomena that occur within organisations, including the importance of trust, information sharing, consensus-seeking and cooperation. These phenomena encourage leaders and followers to mutually support and enhance each other's actions. These ideas appear to provide an appropriate framework for the findings in this thesis. That trust, empathy and supportiveness appear to be important elements of understanding in the SENCo-parent relationship, and forming a social identity is a key part of this relationship.

Haslam & Platow (2001) argue that the formation of a leader centres around processes that create a social, self-categorising relationship. The leader attempts to define what the leader and follower have in common, as well as what separates them from others. Reicher & Hopkins (2001) argue that the emergence of the leader-follower relationship relies on the leader successfully developing a concept of 'us,' merging the sense of 'me' and 'you.' This seems to fit with the attempts from SENCos to improve relationships by developing agreements between them and the parents.

These theories create a psychological framework for the psychological dynamics that drive the SENCo-parent relationship. SENCos take a leadership role in sharing their knowledge about education to create a social identity which is driven by self-categorisation. This seems to motivate all parties to look for ways to make a positive change for children with SEND.

5.5.3 Parents with complex lives

Elements of some of the themes appeared to be specifically related to parents who had complex lives. In the theme of school supportiveness towards the parent, SENCos had experiences of remaining "non judgemental". This was in regard to those parents who had different values regarding interactions with their children. When attempting to improve those relationships, SENCos could put aside these differences. It could be argued that the SENCos were attempting to create a social identity with those parents. They were prepared to ignore those differences and

attempt to look for similarities and shared goals. This supported them to create a self-categorising group identity.

The theme of empathy was related to parents who had complex lives and improving those relationships. This theme can be related to psychological theories around helping behaviour. The empathy-altruism hypothesis states that people are more likely to help another if they can empathise with their situation (Batson, 1991), suggesting that empathy is a core motivator for helping others. This seemed to be the case for SENCOs in this study, who were motivated to help parents who they could empathise with.

This also relates to blame and guilt (see section 2.2.3.2). Broomhead (2013) suggested that parents of children with BESD feel guilty about their children's behaviour and professionals blame parents for their children's behaviour. It seems that when relationships are working well professionals need to look beyond a blame culture and attempt to find new ways to come to a shared understanding.

It seems that parents who have complex and difficult lives require a deeper emotional understanding from SENCOs. SENCOs need to have the emotional skills to ignore differences between themselves and those parents and look for similarities. They also need to attempt to have an emotional understanding of another person's life, which may be very different from their own.

5.5.4 Solution Orientated Approaches (SOAs)

The subordinate theme, skilled communication using techniques from SOAs, suggests that SENCOs have experiences of using techniques from SOAs. This was associated with improving relationships. SENCOs used these techniques when they had experiences of a relationship that could be challenging, or to lay the foundations for a positive relationship. There is a wide range of evidence that suggests that it would be beneficial for professionals working in education to draw on techniques from SOAs (Alexander & Sked 2010; Woods et al., 2011; Redpath & Harker, 1999; Copeland & Geil 1996). Evidence suggests that using SOAs supports professionals to move away from problem-saturated discussions towards looking for goals and solutions (Redpath & Harker, 1999; Copeland & Geil 1996; De Shazer, 1988; Miller

& Berg, 1995). This was the case within the evidence in this thesis in the theme focusing on positive future. The evidence from this thesis also suggests that SENCOs have experiences of helping parents to make small steps forwards rather than making radical changes. This appeared to help parents who were not prepared to accept suggestions of larger changes to make a change. This fits with some of the assumptions of SOAs that suggest that smaller changes are easier to accept than larger ones (Copeland & Geil, 1996; Weakland et al., 1974). SENCOs also had experiences of finding exceptions, a method used in SOA (Molnar & De Shazer, 1987; Copeland & Geil, 1996).

It is interesting that there are other aspects of SOAs that do not seem to be present such as resource activation and problem free talk (Copeland & Geil, 1996). These methods support clients to talk about their strengths and resources rather than their difficulties. As a result problems can be reframed and solutions can be identified. This is likely to support both parents and SENCOs to avoid perception of childrens difficulties as problems and move them towards looking for ways they can establish steps forward. Training SENCOs in alternative SOAs could help to establish positive relationships.

5.5.4.1 Self-determination theory and SOAs

Visser (2010) suggests that one of the core theories related to the success of SOAs is self-determination theory. Self-determination theory relates to motivation and implies that people are motivated when they feel they are autonomous, when they perceive themselves to be competent, and when they feel relatedness or connection and support from those around them. Visser (2010) argues that SOAs creates individual motivation due to these principles. It seems that the SENCOs in this thesis experienced that parents were more motivated to work with them when they used SOAs techniques. These can be related to principles of self-determination theory including building competence, relatedness, and autonomy. These are discussed below.

5.5.4.2 Building competence

Building competence seemed to be one of the major roles of using techniques from SOAs. SENCOs looked for times when the child was doing well and highlighted these to parents. SENCOs had experiences of highlighting the positives to parents. This is likely to support parents, to make them feel that the support they are giving to their children is already going well, therefore giving a sense of competence. A sense of competence is also likely to be built by focusing on taking small steps forwards rather than looking to make major changes.

5.5.4.3 Relatedness

SENCOs had experiences of supporting parents to focus on a positive future rather than focusing on the difficulties. SENCOs talked about discussions they had with parents regarding developing a goal. This could be a way for the SENCO to develop relatedness in that SENCOs and parents are aiming for the same goal: the success and progress of the child.

5.5.4.4 Autonomy

In SOAs it is assumed that the client has the skills to make changes for themselves. Autonomy for the parent has a more complex role in the SENCO-parent relationship. It appears that SENCOs take the lead, as discussed previously regarding compliance. However, the SENCO is required to have many skills in guiding the parent view and building a shared understanding. It would be difficult to have autonomy without knowledge, and the parent needs to utilise the knowledge of the SENCO to make informed autonomous decisions. This is discussed in more detail in the following sections (Professional imperialism and autonomy, 5.6.1.3; Guidance vs. imposing views, 5.6.1.4).

SENCOs need to balance sharing their knowledge of the educating SEND children, but at the same time support parents to be motivated to act. It seems that self-determination theory and techniques from SOAs help SENCOs to maintain the motivation of parents.

5.6 Links to literature review

This section will look at how the evidence from the analysis and the links to psychological frameworks discussed are related to the original literature review. Firstly, there will be a discussion of factors that influence relationships identified by the literature review. This will include community involvement, professional imperialism and autonomy, communication opportunities and trust. Next, there will be a discussion of the social political context in which SENCoS have established their role.

5.6.1 Factors that influence the building of relationships

5.6.1.1 Reciprocal understanding

Within the literature review there were many factors that were suggested to improve relationships between staff working with SEND children and their parents. Barnes (2008) highlighted some of the factors that caused a barrier in enabling SENCoS and parents to work together. This included cultural understanding, lack of information sharing, 'professional imperialism' as well as personal factors such as not being able to empathise with parents, ignoring parents' feelings, and lacking respect for them. These factors can be linked to the evidence in the theme of reciprocal understanding. This theme outlines that it is important for the SENCo and parent to make steps in attempting to understand each other. Anything that inhibits these attempts to understand each other seems to impact on the relationship, and each of the factors identified in the literature review can be related to a lack of reciprocal understanding.

The theme of reciprocal understanding suggests the SENCoS attempted to come to shared understandings with the parents. The evidence in this thesis suggests that this relationship is based on shared understandings and not necessarily a "partnership" as described in the literature (see section 2.1.1). The SENCo appears to feel that they are leaders in the relationship (see section 5.5.2). They establish a dominant role in the relationship, due to their knowledge of education. This can be related to the findings in O'Connor's (2008) study (see section 2.2.3.1), that parents felt professionals have more power and status in home-school relationships. The

powerful status of the SENCo in the relationship should be acknowledged. With awareness of the power imbalance in the relationship, SENCos could consider how this power and knowledge can be disseminated in a useful way in which parents and SENCos can begin to work towards shared understandings. With more awareness about the parent and SENCo roles in the relationship it is possible that those relationships can be improved.

5.6.1.2 Community involvement

Burton & Goodman (2011) discussed how staff knowledge of the community was helpful in working with parents. One of the SENCos in this thesis talked about being from the local community:

“I have a natural ability to work with this cohort of parents because I’m from the area as well. So I’m from here and was at school here and I think it does make a bit of a difference. So, you know, my mum still lives here. So I know the area and I know the types of families and the problems and the issues that arise in this area.”

Lines 8-13 Interview 2 Cherry

This ties in with the psychological frameworks of social identity and self-categorisation, in that being from the same community may enable SENCos to create a sense of being part of a group; however, being part of the community was not a theme for other SENCos. This could have been because they had not experienced being from the community and therefore did not see the benefits of this trait. It seems they could create a sense of social identity in other ways. However, being involved with the community may be a way forward for SENCos to establish a sense of group identity.

5.6.1.3 Professional imperialism and autonomy

One of the factors that Barnes discussed as inhibiting SENCo-parent relationships was ‘professional imperialism’. Barnes (2008) described this as when a professional believes that their expertise is superior to others’ beliefs. The evidence in this thesis suggests that this concept is slightly more complex when applied in real life situations. SENCos found relationships challenging when they did not share the beliefs about the parents’ expectations for the school or for the child, suggesting, similarly to Barnes (2008), that there is a barrier when the SENCos value their own beliefs over that of the parent. However, it seemed in this thesis that a key part of

improving relationships was in attempting to guide parents to share their professional views. Therefore, SENCos do hold knowledge that they value, and they attempt to share this knowledge with the parents. It appears there are some subtle differences between professional imperialism and having the social skills to guide others to share one's beliefs. It seems that it is important for SENCos to hold professional knowledge about educating SEND, but this needs to be communicated in a way that supports parents to feel motivated to make a change. In this thesis, as discussed earlier, SENCos use skills to create a sense of social identity. They do this in a way which supports parents to feel competent and create a sense of relatedness using techniques from SOAs.

5.6.1.4 Guidance vs imposing views

This also links to Mahar's (2016) findings about the views of SENCos on their work with parents. He found that SENCos felt parents could influence decisions about support for their child, but that SENCos had the final say about the provisions children could access. This thesis supports the idea that the SENCo view is prominent, but the parent view is valued by the SENCo. SENCos guide parents and share their knowledge, rather than simply telling them what is going to happen. Again, this suggests that SENCos need to be skilled in communicating in order to motivate them to share their views, at the same time guiding them towards sharing their own professional opinions.

5.6.1.5 Role as mediators and advocates?

Barnes (2008) found that SENCos predicted they would become a "Key Worker" for parents and help them engage with multi-professionals. Pearson, Mitchell & Rapti (2015) suggested that SENCos would spend more time acting as mediators due to the legislation that gave more autonomy for parents. Mackenzie (2013) suggested that SEND staff enjoyed working as advocates for parents and this would continue; however, legislation which allows more autonomy for parents does not necessarily mean that parents will lead the way in their child's education. The evidence in this thesis suggests that parents need assistance in knowing what support helps SEND children make progress in schools. The themes of parents understanding the school and supportiveness suggests that SENCos play a pivotal role in guiding and

teaching parents about what this support could look like. SENCOs need to utilise their professional knowledge about supporting SEND children and help parents know what schools do to teach children. At the same time, SENCOs need to allow parents to have a sense that they have some degree of autonomy. This careful balance of guidance and listening to other views requires skills in communication as described in the theme '*processes involved in relationships*'. Interestingly, one of the SENCOs gave a specific description of how this can be very frustrating and difficult.

“So I really do, I do you try and see it from their perspective, but at the same time I have to sort of fight the battle for the child and as a school a way. So I toss and turn between feeling not angry but frustrated would be the absolute key word. Yeah. Really frustrated because your hands get so tied with what you can do. What we can offer and also knowing what's out there that would really benefit the child.”
366-372 Paula (Interview 1)

This highlights the high level of skill and emotional involvement in managing these relationships.

5.6.1.6 Communication opportunities

Burton & Goodman (2011) found that SEND staff perceived effective communication with parents as a key part of their role. SEND staff outlined accessibility as an essential part of having the opportunity to build positive relationships. Barnes (2008) found that limited time and not being able to coordinate meetings were a barrier for SENCOs in working with others, including parents. The evidence from this thesis in the themes *Informal communication opportunities* and *Formal communication opportunities* suggests that these opportunities are important spaces for SENCOs to form relationships with parents. Pearson, Mitchel & Rapti (2015) suggested that whole-school attitudes have an impact on SENCOs' ability to manage relationships with parents. And it seems that for SENCOs to build relationships, they need to operate in a school system that provides opportunities for SENCOs to meet with parents, both formally and informally.

Burton & Goodman (2011) highlighted that SEND staff talked about being approachable as a trait that helped staff work with parents. This trait appeared to be important for SENCOs in this thesis. SENCOs described how informal communication opportunities were an important chance to create a relationship whereby the SENCO

attempted to make parents feel “comfortable,” “welcome” and “on the same level” as parents. This trait was related to SENCOs attempting to improve relationships. Many of the SENCOs described this as a way to help parents share their story, therefore helping them to understand parents and their build a shared view about the child.

The evidence in this research suggests that both formal and informal communication opportunities are an important part of building relationships and forming a shared understanding. In addition, there are some communication techniques from SOAs that SENCOs appear to utilise during communication opportunities.

5.6.1.7 *Trust*

Maher (2016) found that trust was an important part of the SENCO role in working with parents. The SENCOs in Maher’s paper stated that trust was important because the SENCOs needed to feel trusted to make decisions on behalf of the parents. In this thesis, the theme of *parents’ trust of the school* was related to communication. SENCOs felt that parents would listen to them if they were trusted. One SENCO questioned if a communication breakdown was due to the parent not trusting her. Another SENCO outlined trust as part of reassuring the parents that the child would be safe. One SENCO felt that parents trusted her to keep to her word, and that making apologies was important in building relationships. From this evidence it seems that the concept of trust may serve different purposes for different relationships. Lewicki, Tomlinson & Gillespie (2006) reviewed models of trust and criticised some of the previous research for characterising trust as a static construct. They argued that there are many approaches to exploring trust, but it is a complex concept, which develops between individuals over time. The evidence from this research suggests that the concept of trust is important for developing relationships between SENCOs and parents; however, the construct may need further unpicking, which is beyond the scope of this thesis. A focus on trust in building relationships would enable an exploration into how it appears to have different meanings for individuals within different relationships, and is likely to change over time.

5.6.2 Links to social political context

In the literature review, many of the papers referred to the social political context and government legislation that shapes the SENCo role. This was related to Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1992) ecological systems theory about how the macrosystem, including government legislation, influences schools and families. It was noted that SENCos are given a degree of autonomy over how they orchestrate their role within schools. This has been established by the government laying out guidelines as to how the role could be fulfilled, by requiring SENCos to complete the NASENCo and by encouraging them to be included in senior leadership teams. It was also outlined in the literature review that government legislation has given more autonomy to parents in making decisions about their child's education. These political influences appear to have given rise to a role in which SENCos need to both take on board the parents' views, as well as share their professional knowledge. Government legislation at the macrosystemic level has influenced how SENCo-parent relationships are formed at the mesosystemic level. These influences may have been unforeseen by those who set the policy it would be beneficial for government to ensure that they review the influences of policy on a regular basis. Maybe a review system similar to what is outlined in the SEND CoP, would be beneficial for government policy. The graduated response, whereby an intervention is put into action, the intervention is then reviewed and information from that review is fed back into adjustments or changes to that intervention. This would provide a system whereby policy would evolve based on information from its implementation.

5.7 Limitations and ethical issues

5.7.1 Ability to talk about challenges to relationships

During the interviews SENCos could talk at length about what they had done well or what they had done to improve relationships. SENCos could talk about relationships that they found challenging; however, these were often related to times when the SENCo felt that the parent had not done something. It was interesting that SENCos talked about parents who had difficult and complex lives in terms of improvements to relationships rather than challenges. This suggests that they have had difficulties in

these relationships, but that they were only able to discuss them in a way that suggests these challenges have been overcome.

It is likely that it is difficult for SENCOs to know their own role in challenging relationships as part of the reason they may be difficult could be that they have not yet delved into a deeper understanding of that relationship as they had done in themes *Empathy towards the parents* or *Supportiveness of the parents*. In addition, if SENCOs were aware of their own role in creating a challenging relationship, it is likely that they would not have wanted to discuss this with another educational professional as they may have wanted to maintain a positive professional reputation. There was an attempt to alleviate the pressure to promote their own competence by emphasising to SENCOs that the data would be anonymised and stored appropriately.

Gathering the SENCO perspective on other people's relationships or made-up scenarios may have been a way to explore their perspectives on how professionals can influence relationships to be challenging, without having to be put under pressure to talk about their own mistakes or difficulties. This would require a different research design and question. This research aimed to explore personal experiences. This style of research will always risk creating a biased view of the relationship. In the case of this research, it is felt that the benefits of obtaining an exploration of lived experiences outweighed the risk of creating a biased view of those relationships.

5.7.2 Self-selecting sample

The sample in this thesis was collected using a non-probability purposive sample. Due to this sampling, this evidence cannot be generalised to the whole population. The transcripts and the homogeneity of the sample have been included. Thus, it is up to the reader to decide if they feel they can transfer the evidence and data included in this thesis to their own experiences and context. Smith et al. (2009) outlines this as 'theoretical transferability'.

The sample method could have biased the results as the participants were a self-selecting sample. They may have been more interested in building relationships with parents, or they may have felt they were better at building relationships with parents

than the general population of SENCoS and those who did not offer to take part in the research.

Small sample size is a criticism that applies to many IPA studies; however, this was a choice the researcher made when deciding to use an IPA methodology. It was felt that the in-depth analysis of personal experience outweighed the value of an overview of impersonal knowledge and the nomothetic approach. The ideological nature of IPA and the knowledge of the personal experience have allowed this thesis to give an in-depth exploration of the experiences of SENCo-parent relationships for SENCoS through their perspective. These have been connected to psychological frameworks, and a new understanding of SENCo-parent relationships has emerged.

5.8 Implications for Educational Psychology

5.8.1 Emotional components of professional relationships

Lasky (2000) and Hargreaves (1998) highlight the emotional component of teaching and parent-teacher interactions. Lasky (2000) highlights the differences between interactions and relationships. Interactions are formal, sporadic, and bound by rules. In contrast, relationships require sustained contact, equality, fluidity, increased depth of shared meaning, values, goals and affinity. Lasky (2000) argues that it is rare a relationship can develop between a teacher and parent due to the demands of the work, lack of time to develop trust and engage in meaningful interactions. The evidence in this thesis suggests that in improving relationships with SENCoS, reciprocal understanding of each other, and shared understanding of the child is key. These understandings are not purely cognitive; they are underpinned by emotional experiences such as trust, empathy and a perception of supportiveness. The evidence from this research suggests that these are the key components of developing relationships. Regarding Lasky (2000), who outlined the difficulties of building quality relationships in the teaching profession, it seems that these relationships should be encouraged. There needs to be policy and school cultures that enable relationships to develop. Systems should be in place that allow professionals to value building quality relationships. Professionals should be given the time and flexibility to do so. It appears to be necessary for school systems to

value the emotive aspects of the teaching profession. This will enable professionals to manage their own emotional wellbeing and ensure they can have the emotional capacity to develop relationships with parents. It is possible that this message should come from the macrosystemic level. There could be protocols which outline parental relationships as key. SENCOs could be trained at a national level in the value of these relationships and what skills are necessary in developing them. Educational psychologists are well placed to emphasise this message and offer training at the local level.

5.8.2 Solution Orientated Approaches (SOAs)

Within this thesis, the evidence suggests that SENCOs draw on techniques from SOAs without necessarily realising the background theory or explicitly stating the method. This bottom-up evidence suggests that SENCOs have some degree of knowledge of using the techniques, and have had some success with them in their practice. It suggests that they may benefit from further explicit training in the methods and theory to hone the skills they already possess, and also to learn new techniques related to SOAs. It would also be beneficial for SENCOs to learn about self-determination theory, which may help them to feel confident in empowering parents to take a lead in decision making. Educational psychologists are well placed to offer this style of training to SENCOs.

In addition to this, SENCOs and school staff may benefit from more expertise and explicit training in the areas of psychology that underpin group social identity and self-categorisation theories. This training could involve brief knowledge about why creating a group identity may support parents in feeling motivated to take onboard the views of the school and be open to their suggestions. It may be interesting for SENCOs to find out from the parents' perspective what they feel helps them to feel part of the school group identity. This would encourage a sense of autonomy from both the SENCO and parent; therefore, in terms of self-determination theory, it may motivate both the SENCO and the parent to take part in building a school-based social identity.

5.9 Implications for research

5.9.1 Specific relationships developing over time

The data from this research suggests that SENCoS tend to have slightly different experiences with parents who have complex and difficult situational backgrounds. Patterns emerged from this data that improvements to these relationships were often through empathy, greater understanding of the parents situation, and in ignoring differences. These seemed to emerge over a period of time when the SENCoS had the chance to engage in communication opportunities and use techniques from SOAs. It would be interesting to explore further how SENCoS could be aided to develop shared understandings with parents. It may be that that the relationship develops over time. It would be interesting to track the key events in individual case studies and explore how shared understanding emerges over time.

5.9.2 Social identity of schools

Given the identification of core social psychological frameworks for relationships that develop within schools, including social identity and self-categorisation theory, it would be interesting to further explore perceptions of social identity within schools: how these influence parental relationships and educational outcomes for children.

5.9.3 Exploration of Trust

As mentioned previously, an exploration into the dynamics of trust for individuals, between relationships, and over time, would give further understanding of how this complex construct is developed, and how it influences SENCo-parent relationships.

5.10 Reflexivity

Throughout the process of this research a reflexive diary was kept. It was noted by the researcher that many of those reflections related to self-doubt. It was through the process of reflection that those self-doubts could be managed, and doubts were transformed to questions. It was helpful to develop these questions as they could be explored further in supervision, or be used to guide reading.

Many of the reflections led to questions of the value of this research and the style of explorative research. It has not been until the final write-up that psychological frameworks have been linked to the research evidence. The absence of clear psychological framework was a concern from the beginning. Throughout the process of this research it has been important to value the style of explorative research and embrace the feeling of not knowing.

5.11 Conclusion

This research aimed to explore the lived experiences of the SENCo in building relationships with parents of learners with SEND. The analysis has developed an understanding of what the SENCo-parent relationship means to SENCos and how they achieve this. SENCo-parent relationships are driven by attempts to build shared understandings. The SENCo appears to develop emotional relationships based on trust, empathy and supportiveness. It appears that for successful relationships, SENCos need to enter deeper emotional understandings of parents with complex and difficult lives. These relationships are developed through processes linked to communication opportunities. SENCos seem to use skills related to SOAs to communicate effectively with parents and maintain these relationships.

There are many psychological frameworks which can be related to building and maintaining SENCo-parent relationships. This includes SENCos establishing themselves as leaders with the idea of social exchange theory. Using an assumption of SENCos as leaders in the SENCo-parent relationship, there appear to be psychological dynamics occurring that include the SENCo establishing a social identity and creating a self-categorisation. These appear to support the SENCo in maintaining motivation for the parents to be guided towards a shared understanding.

SENCos seemed to form slightly different relationships with parents who had complex and difficult lives. SENCos appeared to need a deeper emotional understanding of these parents to improve those relationships. This included empathy and an ability to ignore some of the differences between them to maintain a sense of social identity.

Using techniques from SOAs appeared to be important in maintaining relationships. This could be related to self-determination theory and seemed to support the idea that SENCoS encourage a sense of competence and relatedness with the parents. The sense of autonomy was aided by creating a role which enabled SENCoS to guide parents.

The evidence from this thesis appears to support previous research findings, which explored factors that support and inhibit SENCo-parent relationships (Barnes, 2008). These can be related to reciprocal understanding. Community involvement was not a factor involved in SENCo-parent relationships discussed by many of the SENCoS; however, this was mentioned by one SENCo and it could be a way for SENCoS to develop a social identity with parents in the future. In developing relationships, SENCoS appear to position themselves as leaders who guide parents in knowing how to support SEND children. This is done by sharing their knowledge but at the same time valuing the view of the parents.

Previous research suggested that communication was an integral part of building SENCo-parent relationships (Burton & Goodman, 2011; Barnes, 2008; Pearson, Mitchel & Rapti, 2015). The evidence from this thesis supports this research. Both formal and informal communication allow opportunities to form relationships. Within these communication opportunities, SENCoS utilise SOAs to motivate parents.

The evidence from this thesis suggests that building trust from the parents is important in building relationships. SENCoS talked about this in reference to communication, but also as a way to reassure parents. One SENCo had experiences of apologising to build trust. From this evidence, it appears that SENCoS had different ideas about trust and this seemed to be different depending on the relationship. This ties in with research which suggests that trust is a complex concept which develops between individuals over time (Lewicki, Tomlinson and Gillespie, 2006). The concept of trust could be considered as a way of exploring SENCo-parent relationships in finer detail.

In relation to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, it appears that government legislation, which has encouraged parents to have more influence over

decisions made about children's education, has influenced the dynamics of SENCo-parent relationships. It has led SENCos taking the role of a guide in sharing their knowledge with parents rather than making decisions for parents. This emphasises the importance of SENCo-parent relationships as they need to work together to come to a shared understanding.

It seems that SENCos need to have the professional knowledge to educate SEND children. In addition, they need leadership skills to guide and motivate parents, as well as the emotional capability to build relationships with a broad range of people. Through exploring the lived experiences of SENCos in this thesis, a greater understanding of the role has emerged. With the understanding of *what* SENCo-parent relationships are, and *how* relationships can be supported, the importance of these relationships can be emphasised. Furthermore, this knowledge can be used to develop future SENCo training in the skills required for this relationship to work.

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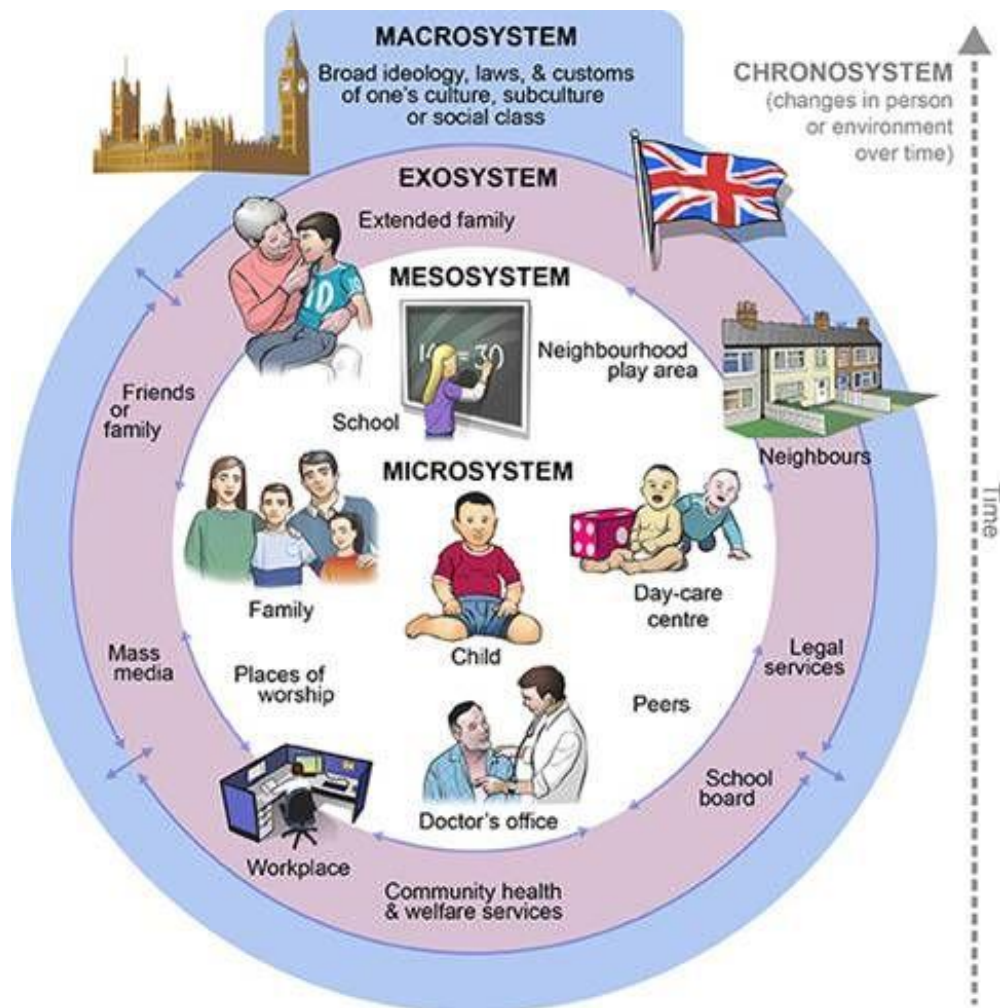
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7 Appendix

Appendix 1: Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979)



Appendix 2: Systematic literature review: Search process

Search Date: 23/10/2015 and 31/08/2016

Search Terms:

- 'SENCo' OR 'Special Educational Needs Coordinator'
- 'parents' OR 'parental' OR 'family' OR 'mothers' OR 'fathers' OR 'parenting' OR 'maternal' OR 'paternal'
- 'relationships' OR 'involvement' OR 'partnerships' OR 'engagement'

Filters:

- Peer reviewed
- 2002-2016

	Title	Year	Place	Include	Reason for exclusion
1	Pearson, Mitchel & Rapti (2015) "I Will Be 'Fighting' Even More for Pupils with SEN": SENCOs' Role Predictions in the Changing English Policy Context	2015	UK	YES	
2	Moyse (2015), The experience of the hidden curriculum for autistic girls at mainstream primary schools.	2015	UK	NO	Not regarding parental relationships
3	Burton & Goodman (2011) Perspectives of SENCOs and support staff in England on their roles, relationships and capacity to support inclusive practice for students with behavioural emotional and social difficulties.	2011	UK	YES	
4	Barnes (2008) Multi-agency working: what are the perspectives of SENCOs and parents	2008	UK	YES	

	regarding its development and implementation?				
5	Mackenzie (2013) Achievers, confidence-builders, advocates, relationship-developers and system-changers: what 'making a difference' means to those who work with children with special educational needs – a typology of rewards.	2013	UK	YES	
6	Klaus (2008) Seeing each other's points of view – SENCOs and parents.	2008	UK	NO	Magazine article
7	Terry (2009) Putting the child and family at the centre — responding to the challenges.	2009	UK	NO	Magazine article not research journal
8	Klaus (2006) Points from the SENCO-Forum. The Spectre of homework.	2006	UK	NO	Magazine article: Not regarding parental relationships
9	Goodwin (2011) Review of The SENCO survival guide.	2011	UK	NO	Book review
10	Maher (2016) Consultation, negotiation and compromise: the relationship between SENCOs, parents and pupils with SEN	2016	UK	YES	
11	Whitfield (2013) Review of AD/HD success! Solutions for boosting self-esteem: The diary method for ages 7–17	2013	UK	NO	Book review

Appendix 3: Information sheet



University Of East London

School of Psychology

Stratford Campus

Water Lane

London E15 4LZ

Principal Investigator

Jenna Heath

jenna.heath@lbbd.gov.uk

0208 227 5882

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

The purpose of this letter is to provide you with the information that you need to consider in deciding whether to participate in a research study. The study is being conducted as part of my Doctorate in Child and Educational Psychology at the University of East London.

Project Title

What are Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) experiences of relationships with parents of learners with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)?

Project Description

This research project is an exploration of the experiences of SENCoS in regards to relationships with parents of SEND children. The study will explore positive and difficult experiences of parental relationships. It will also look at what SENCoS experiences are of how relationships have been improved and how they have been challenged. The aim is to clarify what SENCo roles are in developing parental roles, to draw out good practice and open up discussions about challenges.

You will need to complete an interview which should last for no longer than 1 hour. A summary of the research can be sent if you are interested.

If you choose to take part in the research you will be contacted to arrange a suitable time to complete the interview.

Confidentiality of the Data

The interview will be recorded using a voice recorder. Once recorded all the data (both video and audio) will be transcribed anonymously, the original recordings will be destroyed.

All the information will go towards my Thesis, which is part of the Professional Doctorate in Child and Educational Psychology.

Location

Once you have decided to take part in the study we can arrange a place for the interviews.

Disclaimer

You are not obliged to take part in this study and should not feel coerced. You are free to withdraw at any time. Should you choose to withdraw from the study you may do so without disadvantage to yourself and without any obligation to give a reason. Should you withdraw; the anonymised data you have given will be used towards the write up of the study and any further analysis.

Please feel free to answer any questions. If you are happy to continue you will be asked to sign a consent form before you participate. Please keep hold of this information letter for your own reference.

If you have any questions or concerns about how the study is being conducted please contact the studies supervisor Miles Thomas School of Psychology, University of East London, E15 4LZ Tel: 020 8223 6396 Email: m.thomas@uel.ac.uk

or

Chair of the School of Psychology Research Ethics Sub-committee: Dr Mark Finn, School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ Tel: 020 8223 4493 Email: m.finn@uel.ac.uk

Yours Sincerely,

Jenna Heath

Appendix 4: Consent form



University of East London

Consent to participate in a research study.

What are Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) experiences in relationships with parents of learners with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)?

I have read the information sheet relating to the above research study and have been given a copy to keep. The nature and purposes of the research have been explained to me, and I have the opportunity to discuss the details and ask questions about this information. I understand what is being proposed and the procedures in which I will be involved have been explained to me.

I understand that my involvement in this study, and in particular data from this research, will remain strictly confidential. Only the researcher involved in the study will have access to identifying the data.

It has been explained to me what will happen once the research study has been completed.

I hereby freely and fully consent to participate in the study which has been fully explained to me. Having given this consent I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without disadvantage to myself and without being obliged for any reason. I also understand that should I withdraw from the study the researcher reserves the right to use my anonymous data in the write up of the study and in any further analysis that may be conducted by the researcher.

Participant's name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

.....

Participant's signature

.....

Researchers Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

.....

Researcher's signature

.....

Date

Appendix 5: Ethical approval

School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee

NOTICE OF ETHICS REVIEW DECISION

For research involving human participants

BSc/MSc/MA/Professional Doctorates in Clinical, Counselling and Educational
Psychology

REVIEWER: Patrizia Collard

Course: Professional Doctorate in Child and Educational Psychology

STUDENT: Jenna Heath

SUPERVISOR: Miles Thomas

Title of proposed study: How do Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCo)s view their role in building relationships with parents of learners with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)?

DECISION OPTIONS:

- 1. APPROVED, BUT MINOR AMENDMENTS ARE REQUIRED BEFORE THE RESEARCH COMMENCES** (see Minor Amendments box below): In this circumstance, re-submission of an ethics application is not required but the student must confirm with their supervisor that all minor amendments have been made before the research commences. Students are to do this by filling in the confirmation box below when all amendments have been attended to and emailing a copy of this decision notice to her/his supervisor for their records. The supervisor will then forward the student's confirmation to the School for its records.

DECISION ON THE ABOVE-NAMED PROPOSED RESEARCH STUDY

(Please indicate the decision according to one of the 3 options above)

Minor amendments: The form needs to be signed and dated by the supervisor.
There are numerous spelling, format and punctuation errors (highlighted in yellow) that need attending.

Minor amendments required *(for reviewer):*

Minor amendments: The form needs to be signed and dated by the supervisor.
There a numerous spelling, format and punctuation errors (highlighted in yellow) that need attending.

Major amendments required *(for reviewer):*

ASSESSMENT OF RISK TO RESEACHER *(for reviewer)*

If the proposed research could expose the researcher to any of kind of emotional, physical or health and safety hazard? Please rate the degree of risk:

- ☐ HIGH
- ☐ MEDIUM
- ☐ LOW

Reviewer comments in relation to researcher risk (if any):

Reviewer (*Typed name to act as signature*):

Dr Patrizia Collard

Date: 13.02.2016

This reviewer has assessed the ethics application for the named research study on behalf of the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee

Confirmation of making the above minor amendments (*for students*):

I have noted and made all the required minor amendments, as stated above, before starting my research and collecting data.

Student's name (*Typed name to act as signature*):

Jenna Heath

Student number: u1430385

Date: 14.02.2016

(Please submit a copy of this decision letter to your supervisor with this box completed, if minor amendments to your ethics application are required)

PLEASE NOTE:

*For the researcher and participants involved in the above named study to be covered by UEL's insurance and indemnity policy, prior ethics approval from the School of Psychology (acting on behalf of the UEL Research Ethics Committee), and confirmation from students where minor amendments were required, must be obtained before any research takes place.

*For the researcher and participants involved in the above named study to be covered by UEL's insurance and indemnity policy, travel approval from UEL (not the School of Psychology) must be gained if a researcher intends to travel overseas to collect data, even if this involves the researcher travelling to his/her home country to conduct the research. Application details can be found here: <http://www.uel.ac.uk/gradschool/ethics/fieldwork/>

PLEASE NOTE:

*For the researcher and participants involved in the above named study to be covered by UEL's insurance and indemnity policy, prior ethics approval from the School of Psychology (acting on behalf of the UEL Research Ethics Committee), and confirmation from students where minor amendments were required, must be obtained before any research takes place.

*For the researcher and participants involved in the above named study to be covered by UEL's insurance and indemnity policy, travel approval from UEL (not the School of Psychology) must be gained if a researcher intends to travel overseas to collect data, even if this involves the researcher travelling to his/her home country to conduct the research. Application details can be found here: <http://www.uel.ac.uk/gradschool/ethics/fieldwork/>

Appendix 6: Interview schedule

Interview schedule

I am here to find out about how SENCos experience relationships with parents of learners with SEN. I am interested in examples of your experiences and how you understand them- there are no right or wrong answers.

I am interested in your views so I might not be saying much. It may be like a one sided conversation.

You can have time to think and talk about your answer.

If you don't understand any of my questions just say and I can reword them.

All the information you say will be anonymised. I will change all the names.

I might take some notes, this might be something that I might want to ask you for more information.

Thinking about your job as a SENCo can you tell me about your role with parents?

Can you tell me about some examples of your experiences of relationships which represent your work?

Prompts

Can you describe what happened?

What do you mean by x (broad term/interesting use of language)? You used the word x.....

Why?

How?

Can you tell me more? Anything else? Would you mind talking about that?

What did you notice about this?

Can you tell me how that came about?

Can you tell me the stages in that process? How did you feel before you met? What changed? What did you notice about this?

What do you mean by x (broad term/interesting use of language)? You used the word x.....

Feelings/thoughts about x Circular questions.

What do you think has challenged this relationship?

What do you think has improved this relationship?

What is it about you that helped that situation?

Looking back is there anything you would have done differently?

Can you tell me another experience?

Can you tell me about a positive experience?

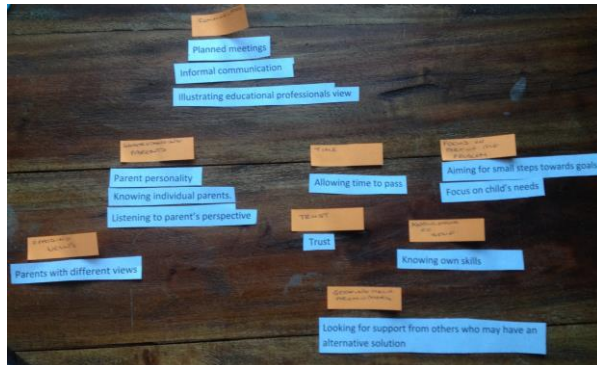
Can you tell me a difficult experience?

Can you tell me the main differences between positive and difficult experiences?

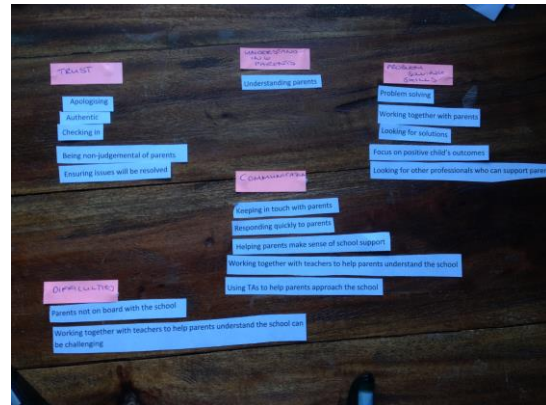
Appendix 7: Superordinate themes

Superordinate themes

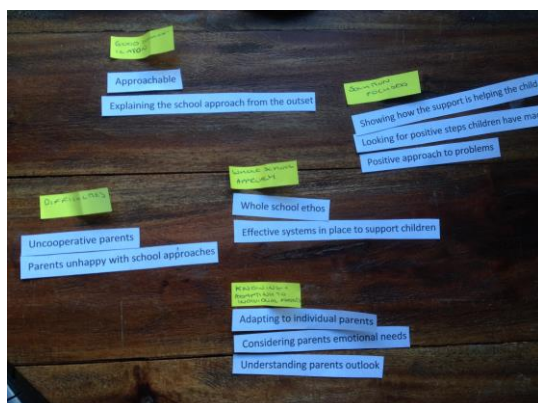
Interview 1



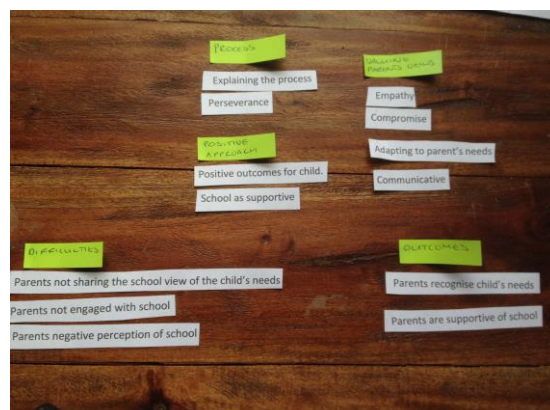
Interview 2



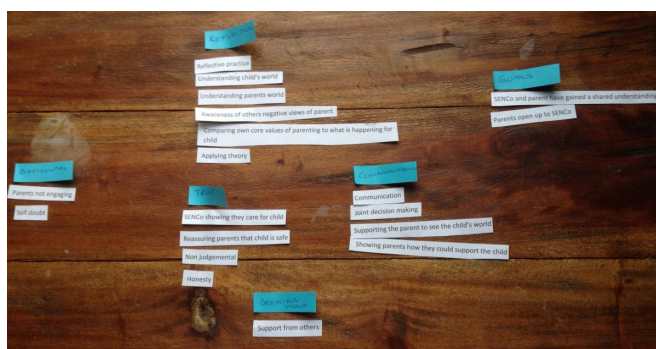
Interview 3



Interview 4



Interview 5



Appendix 8: Group superordinate themes analysis

Interview 1

Superordinate theme	Lines	Key words
Understanding parents	208	
Parents with different roles	209-210	
Parent personality	539-541	
Knowing individual parents	134-135	
Children as a personality	136-137	
Trust	138-139	
Communication	140-141	
Parental meetings	142-143	
Parental communication	144	
Students' education of parents	145-146	
Problem solving skills	147	
Planning for small group towards	148	
Group members' needs	149-150	
Planning for small group	151	
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OF ALL OTHER

TRUSTED
SUPPORTIVE
COMMUNITARIAN
PROBLEM SOLVING

Interview 2

Superordinate theme	Lines	Key words
Understanding parents	208	
Parents with different roles	209-210	
Parent personality	539-541	
Knowing individual parents	134-135	
Children as a personality	136-137	
Trust	138-139	
Communication	140-141	
Parental meetings	142-143	
Parental communication	144	
Students' education of parents	145-146	
Problem solving skills	147	
Planning for small group towards	148	
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